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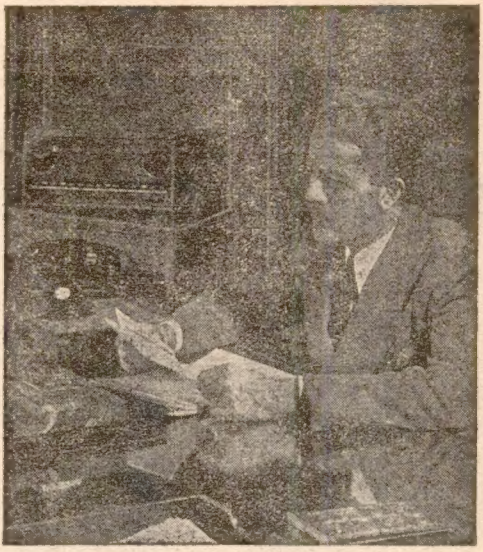

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POPULAR WESTERN

Vol. XXXVI, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION April, 1949

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THE GUN RUNNERS

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

In the heart of perilous Apache territory, Cavalry Trooper Bob Grant and his fighting cowboy pards pit themselves against renegades to prevent a massacre! 13

A Painted Post Novelet

TINHORN TRAIL.....Tom Gunn 46

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts take a look-see into the past of Thimble Jack when mystery stalks the Arizona range!

Short Stories

THE PICTURE GAL PICKUP.....William F. Martin 41

Bow-legged bronc-snapper Bill goes romantic and yearns for wedded bliss

BOSS OF EAGLE ROCK.....Jackson Cole 63

Salty Jim Young spikes a cowtown schemer's little game

BUCKSKIN AND IRON.....Scott Carleton 67

Buffalo Billy Bates smokes out a tough trio of wagon-train crooks

GUN-WOLF BREED.....Dupree Poe 75

In the midst of a feud, Mary Jesson pours salt into some old wounds

HAM CASTS A DOUBT.....Alfred L. Garry 80

Sheriff Egg discovers Deputy Ham's a plumb grand lawyer in time of trouble

Features

THE HOME CORRAL.....Doc Long Trail 6

An entertaining and informative department for readers

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Also See "The Southwest's First Cattle Drive," Page 35, and "From the Annals of the West," Page 66

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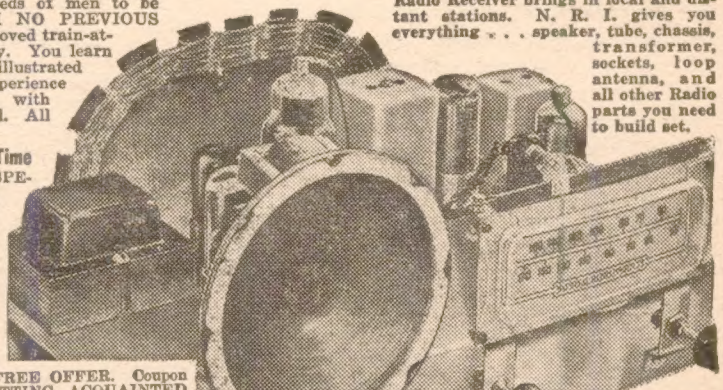

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DOC LONG TRAIL

THE little old man wore a fringed buckskin shirt and he rode like the wind on his little buckskin bronco. He was only acting a part but to himself and the watching crowd he was an oldtime scout and plainsman, come to life again for just this one night. A mighty roar of applause rose from the grandstand as he dashed past, the spotlight clinging to him, to his fluttering buckskin fringes, his long flying hair and beard and the rippling mane and tail of his speeding horse.

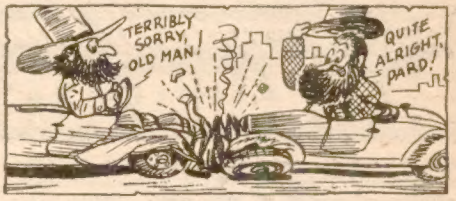
The old-timer was one of several thousand citizens that put on a pioneer pageant in a Western town last summer. It was one of the showiest spectacles I ever saw. But that alone was not what made it remarkable. Every man, woman and child that appeared in the garb of early settlers were so completely wrapped up in their roles that a heap of them busted down and cried when the pageant was over and it came time for them to turn in their costumes!

The Spirit of the Old West

I reckon that goes to show how deeply-planted is the spirit of the Old West in the hearts of us all, hombres and hombresses. Where was the town, you ask? What does it matter? It was only one of maybe a hundred or so, from Denver west, that celebrated trail days in such fashion. The drama of frontier life has never lost its powerful appeal. Americans are steeped in it. The history of Western settlement is the folklore of our land.

Me, I was a temporary member of the community where this particular pioneer festival was held. Months before the show night, the menfolks started beards. The wimmen folks went around in old-fashioned hoopskirts and sunbonnets.

Now you wouldn't think that a change in their usual get-ups would have any inner influence on folks, would you? But it did, strangely enough. It awakened memories among the oldsters and aroused ideals among the young. Those townspeople not only looked like early settlers, but they took on pioneer manners and customs. It wasn't a conscious, wilful change. It just came about



naturally. They were drawn closer together in the almost forgotten neighborliness of early days. On the streets and meeting places, they became more friendly and cooperative. I tell you, it was a remarkable thing to see.

Back to the Present

Then, after it was all over and the men shaved and the wimmen-folks got back in their usual clothes, it was a sort of rough jolt to come back to time, the present. Everybody felt regretful. It seemed as though something mighty precious had been snatched away from them.

I got to thinking, then, about the past and the present, wondering just what "the good old days" had that we haven't got now.

Well, in a good many ways life was a heap easier. In other ways, it contained as much or more discontent, upsets and uncertainty than life does now.

The downright truth is, hypocrisy ruled the actions of people just previous to the Twentieth Century. A pretty stuffy code of morals and behavior called puritanism prevailed.

(Continued on page 8)

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

But that code was obeyed outwardly, violated privately.

Why? The reason, I think, is that everybody was approaching the age of bewilderment. One influence and another was at work producing the most sweeping social change in human history. The world was growing more populous. We were beginning to find out that what we did affected not only another individual but the entire mass of individuals known as society. The rules of life needed some changing.

I'd like to find words to make this easier for you hombres and hombresses who are too young to remember to understand. It was something like this:

If you'd been born 50 years sooner, the things you think and talk about would be only a fractional part of what they are now. Your mental and physical environment would be a narrow circle, bounden by the conventional taboos and strict observances of those days. Those taboos formed an immovable division between what was considered good and bad. They shadowed every thought and accomplishment. Anybody who dared to overstep the rules was promptly condemned by all "right-minded folks" and became a social outcast.

We have some intolerance today. But we don't burn unbelievers at the stake, as was done two centuries ago, or persecute and massacre fellow citizens of a different faith, as we did as late as one century ago, here in this land of the free.

"The Good Old Days"

I have in mind an example of only 50 years ago—a pious-spoken man who began each

meal with a prayer, but between meals was a business trickster such as nobody would deal with nowadays. He refused to hire any man that smoked cigarettes but he would cheat a

(Continued on page 10)

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 8)

poor widow and pat himself on the back for his shrewdness.

The difference between his professed personal beliefs and his ethical code is an example of the kind of hypocrisy that was common. Those were the days of long skirts and short-weight scales. Financial pirates looted the land, then became "good" by founding charitable institutions.

Look at the advertisements in magazines and newspapers of the Nineties. They reeked with fraudulent claims and rank misrepresentation. Food and medicine was dishonestly mislabelled. Storekeepers hid their rotten apples in the bottom of the barrel. Horse traders dealt in blind, balky, wind-broken, stifled nags and they prospered in their crookedness. Folks were good in petty ways, bad in a larger sense. Stock market manipulation schemes ruined trusting investors. But a man was a rascal if he cheated at poker. That's the way it was in "the good old days."

Then came this change in social consciousness that brought about a new set of rules. They aren't perfect yet, these new rules, so there's a flock of confusion and unrest as a result of them.

Wider Horizons

Some folks say that the automobile brought about some undesirable changes. It wasn't responsible. It just happened to be a forerunner of these changes. The automobile is blamed for liberating young folks from the

family circle and its strict standards. That may seem to be the case. Actually, the time had come anyhow for wider horizons.

So the old restraints went, leaving folks free to make fools of themselves, which they did with great thoroughness in the Twenties, in the riotous living of the Jazz Period. Both young and old committed great follies in that

(Continued on page 92)

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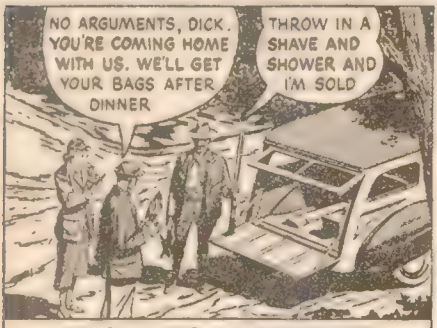
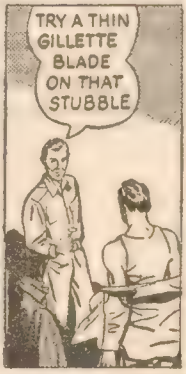
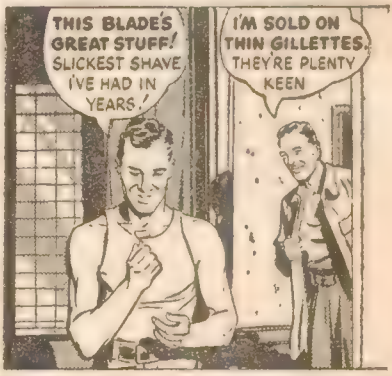


AND SO AFTER A DAY-LONG CROW HUNT WITH HAWK AND GUN...





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WHY, BEN! UNCLE BOB HAS BEEN COMBING THE COUNTRY FOR MEN LIKE DICK
HE'S HANDSOME

MEN, WHEN IT COMES TO EXTRA SHAVING COMFORT, PLUS ECONOMY, YOU CAN'T BEAT THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE KEENER AND LAST LONGER THAN ANY OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES. YOUR FACE IS PROTECTED FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION, TOO, FOR THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE
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The GUN RUNNERS

In the heart of Apache territory, Bob Grant and his cowboy pards fight evil renegades to prevent bloody massacre!

CHAPTER I

Renegade Sergeant's End

GRIM and silent, the prisoner worked at loosening the remaining bar of the cell window. The guardhouse bars were not iron but wood, set into adobe, good enough to hold a pay-day drunk, but they came away without much difficulty for this man.

He listened to the stir in front, where the next relief was being awakened for a two-hour sentry go. He heard the sentry pass. Then Bob Grant, two weeks ago a sinewy, leather-faced cowboy and now a trooper of the 4th U. S. cavalry, under

a novelet by

MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

court martial charges for the theft of five thousand dollars in gold from the paymaster, propelled himself through the window, landing cat-footed on the sentry path.

He slid into the darkness of the Arizona night, but strangely enough did not break for immediate freedom. Instead he circled the small cavalry post, aided in his movement by the darkness and the high wind. He had to be doubly careful, because to-

One man went down, and Grant propelled another as from a catapult into the third attacker

night the guard had been strengthened because of reports of an Apache uprising.

Grant knew that at any minute now the corporal of the relief would make his routine inspection and find him missing. But he went on, until he reached the quartermaster building and stables at the far end of the post. A light was still showing in the office where Sergeant Mueller worked and slept.

Before approaching that office, he found his own horse on the picket line, saddled and bridled it, and led it to the hitching-rack next to the big adobe building.

He stood outside the door of Sergeant Mueller's quarters, listening. There was no sound of voices from Mueller's quarters. Undoubtedly the sergeant was alone.

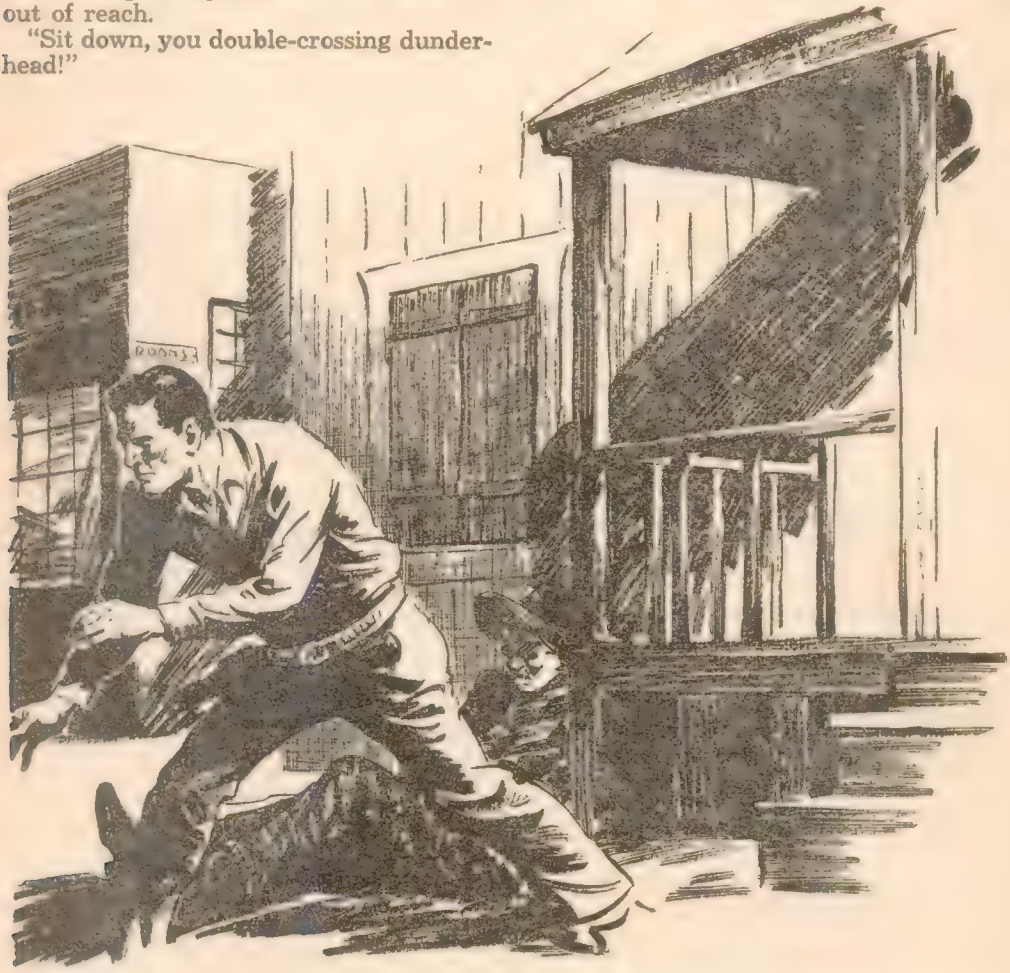
Opening the door quietly, he stepped in, closing it so quietly that the man at the desk, his back to him, did not hear.

The room was small, furnished with a desk, a table, two chairs, some record cases, and an iron cot. A blanket hung over the rear door which led down to the quartermaster storehouse. An iron stove diffused a warm glow through the place. Sergeant Mueller was in his shirt sleeves and slippers. His revolver, in its holster, was hanging with his belt at the head of the bed.

Bob Grant moved silently between the man at the desk and the weapon. Then the stout sergeant, sensing his presence, whirled. His face blanched at sight of the tall, loosely built form looming above him.

"Hey, how haf you got oudt of the guardhouse alretty?" Mueller's eyes flicked desperately to that revolver so far out of reach.

"Sit down, you double-crossing dunderhead!"



BOB GRANT'S voice was quiet but there was no mistaking its menace. Mueller sank back in his chair, fearfully.

"I'm goin' to tell yuh a little story, Dutchy," Bob Grant said, "about a smart quartermaster-sergeant so g r e e d y for money he went into cahoots with some crooked civilians. To finance his end of the deal, this clever sergeant applies for the detail to escort the paymaster from Tombstone, and picks a dumb recruit to be accused for what happens. The dumb recruit, a cowboy not long ago, is given a friendly drink and left in charge of the money-bags. The knock-out drops were strong and the dumb recruit wakes up to learn the money-bags are filled with iron scraps instead of gold coin. When the dumb recruit starts hunting the paymaster, the sheriff and a posse grabs him, finding some ten-dollar gold pieces carefully planted in his pockets. That was a cute joke, Dutchy!"

Grant looked at the squirming sergeant mockingly.

"Vot you speak iss nonsense!" growled Mueller. "Der money, she iss gone undt you iss dere droonk mit some of it in your pogkets. Can I help id if der guard for

der money gots droonk und goes to sleep?"

Bob Grant glanced at the blanket-covered doorway as Mueller rose. Grant moved with seeming carelessness to keep Mueller between him and the blanketed door.

At that moment a shot rang out from the direction of the guardhouse, followed quickly by two more—the signal that a prisoner had escaped. Mueller moved toward his revolver.

"In moochin' around lookin' for the paymaster," the tall ex-cowboy said quietly, "this dumb recruit also kept an eye out for the smart sergeant—finally locatin' him by peekin' through the window of *Los Tres Hermanos*, just as a certain piece of yellow paper was bein' passed over by one of the two crooked civilians. I recognized both of 'em."

Mueller's beefy face went suddenly white. He moved with surprising speed for so heavy a man. The big metal inkwell whizzed so close to Bob Grant's head that he felt the air of its passing.

"You know too much, *mein* friend!" grunted Mueller, and Grant leaped at him.

Mueller was halfway to his revolver before Grant's fist jolted him to a halt. Mueller shook his head, like a bull annoyed with a gadfly, and swung a pile-driver blow. Grant sidestepped in time, trying to maneuver the sergeant in line with that blanket-covered door. He jolted in a swift right and left that drove Mueller back toward the door. Mueller, breathing hard, flung himself forward, seizing Grant in a vast bear squeeze, trying to swing him away from the revolver.

Bob Grant threw his full weight against his heavy antagonist, shoving him toward that blanket. They swayed back and forth, with Mueller trying to gouge out Grant's right eye. But Grant flung the sergeant backward, driving in a jolting right, sending Mueller staggering against the blanket over the doorway.

There came a muffled pistol shot. Mueller, a queer amazement on his face, slumped slowly to the floor, a huge, inert heap.

Grant seized the revolver and dealt a powerful blow straight into the blanket. The force of it nearly threw him off balance as it encountered nothing, the blanket billowing inward.

He leaned over the sergeant. Mueller's pulse no longer beat. Overcoming considerable repugnance, Bob Grant searched Mueller's pockets for that piece of yellow paper he had seen handed over at the *cantina* of the *Tres Hermanos*. There was no trace of it.

Grant glanced at the blanketed doorway again. There was only that burned hole in the blanket, still smoldering.

Bob Grant swept aside the blanket, disclosing the open doorway behind it. From outside came the sound of running feet. Lanterns were flashing in the stables and corrals.

At the far end of the warehouse he heard the pounding of hoofs as someone galloped away. The killer had made his getaway, leaving Grant to take the blame for the sergeant's killing.

In spite of the need for Grant to make his own getaway, he made further search of the room for that elusive piece of yellow paper.

As the clamor of voices and running feet increased outside, he was forced to give it up at last. Seeing the well-filled cartridge belt and the empty holster near the bed, he strapped on the belt and put the revolver back in holster. The muzzle met an obstruction. Grant drew the gun and felt inside the holster. His fingers drew out a wadded piece of yellow paper.

SMOOTHING the paper out, he glanced at it quickly. It was a bill of lading for forty boxes of tools, consigned to the Silver Eagle Trading Company, Tombstone. It had been assigned to the Heinrich Trading Company of the same place.

Grant hastily shoved the paper in his pocket, hurried through the warehouse and out to where his horse was tethered.

Lanterns still flashed in stables and quarters. He led his horse quietly to the feed bin and filled a canvas sack with a couple of extra days' ration of oats. He was strapping this onto his saddle cantle when he heard the corral gate creak open.

Moving cautiously in the shadows, he reached the lower gate, opened it silently. Mounted, he paused on the hillside above the post, to watch mounted troopers boil out of the main gate and head for Tombstone. Then came the smaller horses of the native Apache Scout detachment.

It was these Apache scouts who filled him with concern, knowing their skill at tracking. He waited until they were well on their way before setting out along a trail above the road, heading for Tombstone himself.

Behind him, the rear gate of the quartermaster corral creaked as someone came through.

Riding along through clumps of cactus and Spanish bayonet, Bob Grant's thoughts were none too cheerful. He had intended to go to Tombstone to uncover the truth about the missing payroll money and clear his own name. Now his task was made almost impossible by the killing of Sergeant Mueller.

His principal witness was gone. Even more to the point, Mueller's killing would be pinned on him. Everything would be against him.

Also, in going to Tombstone, where Mueller's crooked cronies hung out, Grant risked putting his head in a noose, for it was easy to get up a lynching bee there. He faced either that or certain hanging by the military authorities.

CHAPTER II

Vengeance Trail

DEPRESSED as he was, he still did not fail to keep eyes and ears alert. Soon, behind him, his ears caught a faint sound of dry gravel slipping down a hillside and the faint ring of steel on stone —someone riding a shod horse. He was being followed!

Temporarily he forgot his worries. That was no "bronco" Apache raider following him. Indians did not ride shod horses.

That left two possibilities—the trailer might be the unknown who had killed Sergeant Mueller from behind the blanket, or one of the Apache trackers of the Army Scout detachment, probably Sanza, the best and shrewdest of the detachment, a Tonto Apache to whom Bob had once done a kindness. Not that this would change matters. The average Apache scout would slay his own brother in the line of duty.

Bob Grant rode downhill toward the road, figuring to put his horse at a gallop and outdistance his trailer. Fifty yards of the road he noticed his horse stretching its neck, ears pointed forward. Born and bred in the Southwest, Grant had learned to rely on a horse. He dismounted and led his mount forward quietly, holding its nostrils to keep it from neighing.

There was the stir and movement of many horses between him and the road, and the faint sound of guttural voices. Advancing cautiously he located the outermost clump of horses—Indian ponies. There were fifty or more. Beyond, in the darkness, the Indians were near the road.

It was an ambush of hostile Apaches, waiting for the next small group of troopers to ride by enroute to Tombstone!

Abruptly Bob Grant heard the distant rhythmic thudding of cavalry, at the regulation trot, coming from the post.

Grant swore under his breath.

"Here's a whole passel of soldiers hot on my trail—and, by glory, *I've* got to keep 'em from gettin' massacred by the Apaches!"

Disgusted, he nevertheless moved out toward the flank of the hidden Apaches, mounted, and drew the revolver from his holster.

"Man alive! Do I have to get out of here in a hurry!"

He swore again under his breath, then poised himself. The trick would be to get the alarm to the troopers while they were still far enough away to avoid Apache fire and still be able to make his own getaway. It was going to be nip-and-tuck.

The oncoming troopers had shortened the distance to a scant four hundred yards when he ripped loose with the revolver and yelled. Shifting position, he repeated the performance.

The startled Apaches, believing themselves suddenly attacked from the rear, began to fire wildly. As the cavalry carbines roared in answer, Bob Grant galloped into a dry arroyo for shelter.

The Apaches, their ambush disclosed and fearful of what might be in their rear, quickly swarmed to their horses and scattered.

Suddenly in the arroyo a dark form loomed above Grant against the sky. A

moccasined foot stepped on his shoulder. Grant seized the ankle and jerked the Apache off-balance. The two rolled, fighting like wildcats, down the side of the arroyo. The Apache strove to get his knife out, but Grant seized his arm and forced it back. The Indian, half naked and greasy, was as elusive as an eel. Angered, Grant drove his fist into the Indian's face. His knuckles collided with teeth. He heard the Apache groan. Feeling down the length of the Apache's arm, Bob Grant grabbed the knife, jerked it loose, and struck.

The Apache went limp.

Rising, Grant's foot encountered a rifle. He picked it up, and took the cartridge belt from the fallen Apache.

The rifle was an excellent one, a magazine job, far superior to the old-fashioned single shot carbines carried by the troopers. It was longer in range and devastatingly more rapid in fire. Wondering how the Indian had come by it, he recalled that yellow bill of lading! "Forty boxes of tools!" Sergeant Mueller and the unsavory characters with whom he associated in Tombstone! Heinrich Trading Company —Heinrich Mueller, the sergeant's full name!

He swore in cold hatred at the rottenness of renegade white men, capable of such treachery to their own race. Forty boxes of rifles in the hands of the Apaches, were enough to wipe out half the settlers in the Territory, as well as massacre every officer and trooper in the post!

More grimly than ever was he resolved to reach Tombstone.

THE troopers who had been warned by Grant's shots would now be cautiously coming forward on foot, carbines ready. The Apaches would not go any farther than they had to, and would undoubtedly be lurking on the mesa behind him. If the officers with the troopers decided to make careful search of the mesa, Bob Grant was a gone gosling. But to cross to the far side of the road once more would be suicide.

Calmly Grant decided to sit tight and see what would happen. He took the precaution, however, of standing by his horse and keeping firm grip on its nostrils to prevent any greeting of its stable mates.

The troopers came on in line of skirmishers. The left flank was a scant five yards from where Bob Grant stood, rigid.

"Ov it wasn't an Army rayvolver what fired thim shots Oi'll ate me hat!" remarked a flank trooper.

"No matther," said the next man, "most loike we'd all hov been kilt widout thim shots. But who could 'a ben out here shootin' an Army gun all by his lonesome? Most loikely a frindly Injun—not thot we don't need frinds wid ivrey Apache in the Territory hittin' the warpath!"

The sharp command, "Prepare to mount!" came in a brisk voice. Grant recognized the voice of Major Endicott, the post commander himself!

He heard the led horses clatter up in the darkness.

"Mount!" came Major Endicott's brisk command, and the cavalry detachment resumed the march toward Tombstone.

Bob mounted, tucking the captured rifle into his saddle-boot and calmly followed, taking up the trot with the troopers but remaining about ten yards behind, unseen in the darkness, like the hunted fox which doubles back and follows the trail of the pack.

This, he reasoned, should certainly throw off his tracker.

He followed for a good hour or more, until the east showed the first faint streaks of dawn, then he turned and rode up into the hills, hoping to find a hideout, safe from the prying eyes of soldier scouting parties and Apache warriors.

It was growing dangerously light when he at last spied an abandoned mine, led his horse up the steep slope, and into its dark interior.

The place, to all appearance, had been abandoned only recently, probably because of the Apache uprising. There were cooking utensils, a bunk, and tools—also a cool, clear spring. After watering and feeding his mount, and taking a final look into the canyon below where he saw no trace of any pursuit, he ate some food and then stretched out for some much needed rest.

He awoke with a sense of something wrong, cautiously raising his head to peer about. With a shock he saw a seated man blocking the mine entrance, rifle across his knees. The man, whose back was partially turned, wore the dark shirt, car-

tridge belt, breech clout and black hat of the Army Scout detachment.

As Bob Grant strove to rise silently, revolver in hand, some faint noise must have warned the Apache Scout for he swung quickly about.

The two men gazed at each other levelly.

The scout was Sanza, the clever old scout whom Bob Grant once had aided. It came suddenly to Grant that the Apache could long since have disarmed and captured him while he slept, had he been so minded.

He lowered his revolver. Not until then did Sanza break the silence.

"*Sisquism!* (my brother)" he greeted in Apache, his face expressionless as he placed his rifle on the ground.

"*Sisquism!*" Grant answered with a slow grin and, rising, grasped the Indian's hand. They continued to speak in Apache. "How came you here?"

"I saw you leave the post," Sanza said. "I followed you here and watched over you while you slept."

"Why, Sanza?" asked Bob, curious.

The Apache shrugged. "You were born in this country—you know the Indian," he countered. "You once put the blanket of your protection over my squaw and brought her and my son to shelter. Besides, I did not like that fat sergeant with the angry eyes. It is well that he is dead."

"Do you know who killed him?" asked Grant suddenly.

"*Seguro que si!*" Sanza spoke the mixed Spanish and Apache dialect. "Surely. It was Chato (Flat Nose) the half-breed, who slew him and fled back to Tombstone."

"Then someone in Tombstone sent Chato to kill him?"

"Who is Sanza to know that?" asked the Indian with dignity.

"I go to Tombstone to find out!"

Sanza shook his head. "There are many Apaches on the warpath who will kill you before you get to Tombstone. If they do not, there are many evil white men in Tombstone who will kill if you get there. Stay here, brother."

"But I must wipe out the shame put upon me," said Grant.

Sanza reflected upon this. "That is true," he admitted. "I will go with you to Tombstone. But first we must feed and water our horses."

CHAPTER III

"Good" Samaritan?

ONCE the horses were cared for, Sanza led the way far back into the mine and up a crude ladder through a narrow, chimneylike passage to the clifftop. The scout parted the mesquite that concealed the opening and pointed to the mesa, and to the canyons below. Already long shadows were being cast, and Grant was surprised at the length of time he had slept.

He saw something else. Far out to the southward high, thin clouds of dust were winding along every trail, converging to the northward.

"Is the whole Apache nation on the march?" he asked, startled.

Sanza nodded. The two men gazed downward somberly for a time, before returning to their horses.

It was dusk when they reached the mouth of the canyon. It was well they had remained in hiding, for soon after they had dismounted and hidden their horses, there came the drumming of unshod hoofs. A double file of Apache warriors came into view, riding across the mouth of the canyon.

The stringy black hair of the Indians was bound in red brow-bands, they were naked except for breech clouts. Their great chests and sinewy muscles gleamed with oil, and their feet and legs were clad in legginglike riding moccasins. At their head rode an unusually tall Apache, six feet at least, wearing a single eagle feather, dyed red, and carrying a slender, tufted lance from which another red eagle feather hung.

There were nearly a hundred warriors in this war party—tough, hardy and resourceful. Had they been provided with repeating rifles instead of the bows and arrows and lances, they would have been nearly unbeatable as fighting men.

When they were out of sight, Grant and Sanza returned to their horses.

"Mescaleros from San Carlos Reserva-

tion," grunted Sanza. "The big one—medicine man—Kla-de-Tahe. Big man, big mouth. Many white men will die after the rising of the new moon!"

Bob raised his head sharply. "That's only six days from now. What then?"

"Big promises from Kla-de-Tahe—all Apaches fine new guns—many cartridges—shoot fast. Kill all soldiers when new moon rises, then kill all white settlers. Sanza take his squaw and boy to hide. Too many Apaches on the warpath, not enough soldiers. Soldier guns no good—Apache guns too good!"

"Where are those guns now?"

"Only white men in Tombstone know."

"Do you know those white men, Sanza?"

"Little ones, yes. Big ones, no!"

"Who are the little ones?"

"Tucson Jimmy, Broken Nose Charley." He mentioned two barroom hangers-on well known in Tombstone.

Bob Grant drew a deep breath. "You speak truth, Sanza. I saw those two with the fat sergeant at the *cantina* of the *Tres Hermanos* the night the money was stolen."

"*Seguro!*" said Sanza.

"And this fellow Chato killed the fat sergeant—is he mixed up with the gun selling?"

"How should Sanza know?"

"What does Sanza think?"

"Sanza thinks anybody hire Chato to kill for two dollars."

"Ah!" said Bob Grant and grimly set his horse at a gallop that would bring them to the outskirts of Tombstone within another hour.

IT WOULD have saved Grant a lot of trouble had he known that Chato, after shooting Sergeant Mueller, had reached Tombstone the night before and made his way to a lone warehouse behind the Silver Eagle Saloon.

He sent word by a Mexican to the saloon and soon he went inside to meet a bluff, hearty man with a glistening bald scalp, and an air of geniality.

"Well?" he asked Chato.

"Me kill 'em."

"The fat sergeant, Mueller?"

"Me kill fat sergeant!"

"*Bueno!* Where's the piece of yellow paper that was wadded in his revolver holster?"

Slowly Chato shook his head. "No could do."

"Wha-a-t!" the stout man blazed.

"No could get—tall fellow there."

"Dutch Henry's" bald scalp was suddenly covered with fine beads of sweat. "What fellow?"

"Young soldier—Bob Grant! He takes sergeant's gun holster, and belt too, I theenk!"

"I thought he was in the guardhouse!"

"*Si*, but he break out—verree mad wid Sergeant Mueller. Tell 'em he see 'em wid Tucson Jimmy and Broken Nose Charley at *Tres Hermanos*."

Dutch Henry's face was suddenly white.

"Why didn't yuh shoot him?" he asked dully.

"Him too smart. Him keep Sergeant between him and me, where I hide behind blanket. I theenk he come to Tombstone queeck. Him plenty mad! Mebbe so I keel heem whan he coom."

"No!" The stout man looked stricken. "The military will ask too many questions. Get out and send Doc to me, pronto!"

Shortly a slovenly, bewhiskered man in corduroys, who wore heavy-lensed spectacles, came shambling in.

"Lissen, Doc!" the stout man said, low-voiced. "We're up the crick a mile without a paddle! Chato fixed Mueller all right! That fat slob tryin' to hold us up for two-thirds of the profits and takin' the bill o' ladin' for security! He got what was comin' to him. But Chato didn't get the bill o' ladin'!"

"Why not? Mueller carried it in his holster!"

"Yep. But who do yuh think grabbed the revolver, and the holster? Bob Grant!"

Doc sat down suddenly, wiping his forehead with a bandanna.

"The devil yuh say!" he exclaimed weakly.

"And Bob Grant's on the way here! We got to work fast!"

"But if Chato made a clean getaway they'll shore hang a murder charge agin Grant. The sodgers'll pick him up quick!"

"Which is exactly what we don't want!" Dutch Henry protested. "That Bob Grant knows too much? We got to keep him away from the sodgers and get rid of him quiet-like. Remember he's carryin' around that bill o' ladin'."

"Jumpin' Jerusha!" Doc frowned in

thought. "How about me tellin' the boys to keep an eye peeled for Grant—he won't be too particular who offers him a hand. S'pose I get aholt of him and offer him a hideaway and a job takin' that wagon train acrost the border? If I can't get the bill of ladin' back tonight, yuh can send Chato along to give Grant what's comin' to him and get the paper acrost the Border!"

Dutch Henry considered this.

"It's a good scheme. Only trouble is, he knows Tucson Jimmy and Broken Nose is mixed up in this business."

"We'll keep 'em out of sight. Better still, send 'em down to Fronteras to finish the job in case Chato slips up!"

Dutch Henry nodded, rose, and departed for his saloon, the most spectacular of his many enterprises in Tombstone. . . .

Because Dutch Henry's saloon *was* the most garishly lighted spot in the small Border town, it was the first that Bob Grant's eyes rested upon when he and Sanza approached Tombstone.

"Better you wait here," advised Sanza, before they entered town. "I go look."

"Go first to the *Tres Hermanos,*" said Grant. "See if yuh can find trace of Tucson Jimmy and Broken Nose. I'd like to get my hands on those two buzzards!"

Sanza nodded and moved off. In a half hour he returned.

"Tucson and Broken Nose go away to Mexico, to Fronteras," he reported. "Wagon train leaving for Fronteras tomorrow morning!"

"Fronteras?" Grant repeated thoughtfully. "That might be where the guns are waitin' shipment. What else did yuh find out?"

"Plenty soldiers here. Somebody buy them plenty whisky, white man, four eyes (glasses) called Doc. Tried to buy me whisky at *Tres Hermanos.*"

"Why?" asked Grant, sharply alert.

"He told Sanza, close to my ear, soldiers look for Bob Grant. Grant good man, he said. Don't want soldiers to catch Grant. Plenty white men in Tombstone will kill Bob Grant. He said Bob Grant better get across to Mexico quick!"

"Who in blazes is Doc?" Grant said in English thoughtfully. "There's a catch in it somewhere! And how am I supposed to get across to Mexico with everyone on the lookout for me?"

WHEN Grant quickly translated into mixed Spanish and Apache, the Indian had the answer.

"Sanza asked Doc," he said. "Doc works for Dutch Henry who fix it so you can get into Mexico."

"Does this Doc speak with a double tongue?"

"Sure!" said Sanza calmly.

"That's what I thought!" observed Bob.

Grant knew Dutch Henry, the big, genial proprietor of the Silver Eagle. Something clicked in his mind. "Silver Eagle Trading Company!" As for the too plausible Doc—Grant shrugged—he'd have to see the man. It was his only chance to get on the trail of the guns, and it was only five days before the rising of the new moon!

It was taking a big chance, going to meet the fellow, but one more wouldn't make much difference.

"*'Sta bueno,* (let's go)!" he said.

The two rode toward Tombstone. Dismounting in the darkness behind the adobe *Tres Hermanos,* Sanza went inside. He came out with the shambling Doc.

"What's this all about?" Grant asked steadily. "How come this sudden interest in my welfare?"

Doc peered into the shadows where Grant stood.

"Ain't nothin' except Dutch Henry's got a kind heart and knows yuh're a local boy in trouble. Also he needs a good man to take a wagon train over into Mexico and bring some cargo back. Yuh're shore better off out of this town. About twenty-five soldiers lookin' for yuh. Even Major Endicott is here, investigatin'. There's talk among the civilians of lynchin' yuh."

As though to add emphasis to his words, there came through the open windows of the Mexican barroom a drunken chorus singing the soldiers' song:

> Forty miles a day on beans and hay,
> In the Regular Army-O!

"I been feedin' the soldiers plenty of whisky," explained Doc, "but I can't do nothin' with the civilians, nor with Major Endicott."

"Where's this wagon train headed for?" asked Grant.

"Fronteras," said Doc, low-voiced.

"What sort of cargo?" pressed Grant.

"Oh, tools—blacksmith and carpenter

tools and ranchers' supplies for Dutch Henry's general store. Mebbe a leetle contraband brandy for the bar."

"How big a cargo?"

" 'Bout forty boxes."

"All right," Bob Grant said quietly. "I'll head out with yore wagon train to Fronteras."

"Speakin' of fine brandies and whiskies, how about a snort? There's a back room in this here *cantina* where nobody'll bother us."

Sanza shook his head, made motions of being sleepy. But Bob Grant accepted the invitation.

"Don't mind if I do," he said, for he was hoping to probe more deeply into what was behind all this.

CHAPTER IV

A Bit of Yellow Paper

WHISKY was brought to the back room, but Bob Grant took but sparingly of it. He realized the necessity for keeping a clear head.

The talk was of the Apache uprising, the rumors that more troops might be sent into the Territory. Doc suddenly stared at Grant's revolver and holster, as though seeing it for the first time.

"Ain't that carved leather holster the one that Sarg Mueller used to carry?" he asked.

"Yes," Grant said, and shrugged.

Doc shook his head. "Better take mine and give me that one. They'll shore hang it onto yuh if they find yuh wearin' it!"

"I may as well be hung for a sheep as a goat," said Grant. "I'll stick to this one. Tell yuh what yuh can do, though—get me civilian shirt and pants and hat."

"Shore, shore," said Doc, keeping the disappointment out of his eyes.

He went out to bring the change of clothes and another round of drinks. Bob Grant watched the door narrowly while he was gone, hand on revolver butt. He relaxed when Doc returned with filled glasses and the clothing. Grant took occasion, when Doc was not looking, to spill most of the liquor under the table. He had not forgotten the knock-out drops of a previous experience.

Pleading sleepiness, he excused himself early. Getting directions as to where the wagon train was parked, he made his way carefully to the corral and warehouse behind Dutch Henry's saloon. There was no sign of Sanza. Probably he was feeding and watering the horses. Grant went on, anxious to see the wagon train and check its cargo capacity.

Aside from the buzz of talk and laughter from the Silver Eagle Saloon, the town was asleep. As he was passing the loading platform of Dutch Henry's warehouse, he thought he saw a shadow move in the darkness but, on closer view, put it down to his own sleep-heavy eyes.

Then, in a flash, all trace of sleepiness was driven from him. The solid weight of someone dropped heavily upon him from the loading platform. He went down on his knees. Someone was frantically striving to unfasten his cartridge belt. He rolled onto his back and kicked out with both feet, propelling his attacker into the wall with a thud. Two more forms flung themselves upon him, and again clutching hands were at work on the buckle of the belt. He brought up his knees, twisted sideward and staggered to his feet, kicking and striking.

One of his smashing blows landed against a chin and the man went down. He seized another, and propelled him forward as from a catapult, into the advancing third man. Both went down. There was still a fourth, but as Grant advanced he took to his heels.

Turning, he saw the other three staggering away into the darkness. His belt and holster were still intact although the heavy buckle was half undone. He tightened it, then felt the reassuring crinkle of the yellow paper inside his shirt pocket. It hadn't taken Doc long to show his hand!

He went to the third wagon in the line as Doc had advised, made noisy preparations as though preparing to sleep, then quietly slid out the other end of the wagon moving quietly in the shadows, until he had circled back to his horse. Sanza was there, waiting. The two mounted and took to the Border trail, heading for a secret crossing far from the main road.

"The guns are in Fronteras, Sanza! Just how I'm going to wrestle 'em back across the Border to Major Endicott I can't figger out yet. I wish I could get hold of some of my friends—Artie McCloskey and the rest of the cowboys to give a hand."

"McCloskey?" Sanza said. "McCloskey and his *amigos* join with Mexican Seguridad Police. Maybe find them in the camp close to customs station!"

Grant was immensely cheered.

"We'll head there *pronto!*"

It was easy to say, but harder to do. Between war bands of Apaches, and a tightening of the Border Patrol on the American side, crossing the line was a long and complicated process. They had to hide out for hours to elude customs guards and military patrols hunting for Bob Grant.

It was not until late afternoon of the next day that they managed to cross the line and then only far to the east of Fronteras, near which Grant hoped to find his friends.

"Only four days to go!" he reminded himself grimly.

IT WAS dusk when they finally reached the springs, the favorite camping place for border travelers. Within sight of the campfires, Sanza kept on going.

"Sanza go find squaw and son—maybe come back soon!" And he was gone into the darkness.

It was a popular place, judging by the many campfires and the clamor of voices, the braying of mules and the whinnying of horses. Wagon trains were outside the fringe of trees. Grant was passing one of these trains when he noted something familiar about the wagons and found a heavy, flatnosed half-breed staring at him from one of them.

"Is this Dutch Henry's train?" he asked the man.

"*Si,* yes—you are Señor Grant?" The fellow was a little over eager.

"Yes, who are you?"

"Me Squaw Charley!" said the half-breed, the name by which he was known to white men, and carefully refraining from giving his Indian name of Chato. "Maybe you eat in wagon here tonight?"

"Mebbe! Well, I'll be seein' yuh."

Bob Grant went on, seeking his friends.

Chato marked the direction he took, but lost him quickly among the trees.

Grant approached each campfire until at last he heard a rousing chorus of American voices pleading, "Oh, Susannah! Don't you cry for me!"

Heartened by the sight and sound of his own countrymen, he stopped at their fire. A delighted voice shouted his name. A tall, dark cowboy—Artie McCloskey, with whom Grant had worked in the last cattle job, grabbed him joyously as he dismounted.

"Why, yuh old catamount! Heard yuh was in trouble and I been lookin' high and low for yuh. Gents"—he turned to the half-dozen others—"meet Bob Grant, the squarest-shootin' hombre on either side of the Border!"

The other cowboys rose and shook hands—"Red" Davis, big and shy-voiced, Georgie Mann, keen-faced and silent, tall "Wild Bill" Otte, dreamy-eyed Doug Nichols, and his brother, quiet Mac, and sardonic Dan Mahoney. Someone shoved forward a tin cup of whisky and a plate of supper and Grant, for the first time in

[*Turn page*]

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many days and nights, felt the warmth of friendliness and cheer. A Mexican boy already had a feed bag on his horse and was unsaddling.

"How come all you boys over on this side?" Bob asked.

THE six men looked at each other, grinning, a little embarrassed.

"It was all on account of a little misunderstandin'," said one.

"We didn't know he was the sheriff," added another.

"He come into the barroom kinda chesty and—"

"Bill Otte took his gun away from him," came another voice.

"Red Davis and Dan Mahoney laid him over the bar and paddled him."

"He rounded up a posse and we had to pull out of Tombstone *pronto* with everyone shootin' at us. Afraid we kind of shot up a couple of 'em!"

"And we was mindin' our own business," said an aggrieved voice. "We just come in the Silver Eagle to beat up Dutch Henry and go on. Anyways we had to pull our freight for this side of the border till things quieted down!"

"You don't like Dutch Henry?" Grant asked, elaborately casual.

"Not on your tintype!"

Faces became grim, silence fell. Sensing that this was a private affair, Grant forebore asking any further questions. Artie McCloskey broke the quiet.

"Heard tell you joined up with the cavalry?" he said to Grant.

"Yep. Sort of had a hankerin' for the Army. My old man fought through the Civil War and was killed as a captain in the regular Army fightin' the Apaches. My joinin' up didn't turn out to be a good idea!" Grant's voice was bitter. They did not question him.

"Better jine up with us. We're makin' five pesos a day and found, with these here *Seguridads*. Nothin' much to do, and grub and plenty of likker."

"Mebbe I will," said Bob Grant. "But I got a little job to finish first. Where you-all headin' next?"

"Back to Fronteras tomorrow. We been out eight days and we're supposed to be plumb tired!"

"Well, I'll probably run into you there. I'm headin' that way in the mornin'."

The talk turned to the Apache uprising and the medicine man, Kla-de-Tahe, as the fomenter of all the trouble.

" 'Taint his fault!" spoke up Mac Nichols. "If that bunch of scalawags in Tombstone and Tucson would let the Injuns alone, they wouldn't follow no medicine man and his crazy promises!"

"But they shore raised plenty of trouble this time. There'll be a lot of Uncle Sam's sodgers killed and lone ranchers tortured and killed 'fore this ruckus lets up!" Bob Mahoney shook his head. " 'Specially if any more of these shiny new repeatin' rifles gets into the hands of the Apaches—there's too many as is."

"The Injun is a better fighter than the sodger, in this kind of country," Georgie Mann observed. "Let Injuns have better guns than them old-fashioned single-shot carbines the calvary carries, and they'll wipe out all the sodgers in the Territory!"

All were agreed on this, even Bob Grant, who stared into the fire.

They hospitably offered Bob Grant blanket and place by the fire, which he accepted. Before turning in he told Artie McCloskey his problem.

"Yuh shore need help!" declared Artie, and promised, "I'll put it up to the gang!"

An hour later, Chato, grimly intent upon finding his intended victim, came prowling through the encampment. He paused, peering intently, not ten feet from where Grant slept, rolled up in his blanket, indistinguishable from the other forms around the fire.

CHAPTER V

Death Stalks the Darkness

CAUTIOUSLY CHATO crept upon the sleeping men. *Americanos* made the half-breed's caution necessary. He examined the two nearest and was about to move to the third when he stood rigid with fear.

A harsh voice was ringing in his ears.

"Get out of here, yuh sneakin' skunk, before I fill yuh full of lead!"

There came the click of a revolver being cocked and a stirring among the prone blanketed forms. Chato fled, expecting every second to feel the smash of a bullet in his back.

Out of range, he slowed down, raging inwardly at the bad luck which interfered with his attempt to finish off Bob Grant.

He was heading for his own wagon when a long arm reached out from the darkness. A hand grabbed him by the neck, another hand took his revolver from its holster. Earth and sky met and crashed as he was heaved up and smashed down, shaken until his teeth and every bone in his body rattled.

The hated Bob Grant stood above him. Grant, after shouting at Chato by the campfire, had swiftly circled the despondent half-breed, reaching the wagon train before him.

Grant squatted on his heels, revolver in hand.

"Now, *amigo*, a little show-down is in order. Who hired yuh to shoot me?"

Chato preserved a sullen silence. Grant seized him by the throat. Chato stood the increasing pressure until his face grew black and his tongue started to protrude, then weakly beat upon the ground and tried to nod. Grant relaxed his grip.

"*Hombre*, yuh'd better talk, and talk fast!" he said ominously. "I'm gettin' tired of foolin' with yuh! Who hired yuh to kill me?"

Chato fought for breath, then wheezed, "Dutch Henry!"

"So I figgered," growled Grant. "What'd yuh say yore name is?"

"Me Squaw Charley," wheezed Chato. That name meant nothing to Bob Grant.

"Do Tucson Jimmy and Broken Nose Charley work for Dutch Henry too?" he asked relentlessly.

Chato nodded glumly.

"Have they got orders to kill me?" Again Chato nodded.

"Where are they now?" asked Grant, suddenly alert to this new threat.

"Maybe they come soon, then go to Fronteras."

Grant rose, a swift resolution forming in his mind. He gazed down at Chato.

"I suppose it would be wiser to kill you, Squaw Charley. I've drawn yore fangs once. Next time I'll bash in yore head for keeps!"

With that he was gone into the darkness. After a while Chato heard the thudding of a horse's hoofs receding in the distance on the road to Fronteras.

Bob Grant had scarcely started for Fronteras when two white men, riding from the north, slid unobtrusively into the wagon park and sought out Chato who by the light of the dying campfire looked up and recognized "Tucson Jimmy" and "Broken Nose" Charley.

They were not the most reputable of citizens, Tucson being a periodic drunk, dependable only between debauches, and Broken Nose Charley being stupid, his ugly face disfigured by the mutilation which gave him his nickname. The two had moved hurriedly out of California, one jump ahead of a Vigilante posse equipped with a stout rope and anxious to use it. In Tombstone they had gravitated to Dutch Henry's employment.

"Yuh finished Grant off?" asked the lank Tucson, his prominent Adam's apple sliding up and down his scrawny throat.

Chato shook his head, morose and sullen.

"That *hombre* too smart!" complained the half-breed. "Tonight I foller heem, and he see me first and chase me away. Next he run fast and come here first and grab me and choke me and take away my gun, then he ride away to Fronteras!"

"Yuh're a fine killer, Chato!" Tucson eyed him coldly. "Now we got to mosey to Fronteras and finish the job. Dutch Henry ain't goin' to be too pleased with you."

The two men pulled out for Fronteras, after Bob Grant, having already lost a day through too long tarrying at a bar.

CHATO didn't waste much worry on the opinions of Tucson and Broken Nose, but he fully weighed the possible disgrace that would come to him, and the certain punishment that would be visited upon him if he failed to report matters.

He saddled his horse and rode to the Border crossing. A man known as "Looney Louey" hung around there and, under cover of a foolish bearing, kept sharp watch out for Dutch Henry's interests. Chato reported Bob Grant's latest movement to him. In five minutes a messenger was on his way to Tombstone, carrying the news to Dutch Henry.

Then Chato returned to his camp.

As for Grant, he was so fighting mad he would have welcomed the chance to beat down any opposition on the lonely road, but none appeared.

Slowing down to ease his horse up a rise, he heard horses following him. He quickly drew off the road and two horsemen, looking frowsy in the early dawn, came riding by. He recognized Tucson and Broken Nose but allowed them to go on far enough ahead of him so that he could keep them under observation with himself unseen.

Grant surmised they were looking for him, for Squaw Charley had failed to kill him. Now he was certain that the desperadoes ahead of him had been sent to do the job. He could not allow them to waste his time. He had to get those guns away from Dutch Henry's men and turn them over to the soldiers as quickly as possible. Scarcely three days were left now, and a long way to go with a slow wagon-train.

He came into Fronteras after sunrise, a drab little town with a dreary plaza, a single warehouse, some brick houses, adobe shacks, and an ancient church. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the two frowsy characters he sought sliding furtively into the *cantina*. He acted as though unaware of their presence and rode up to the brick house that sheltered the *alcalde*, tethered his horse and walked into the office.

"Señor Miguel Terraza, a su servicio!"

The *alcalde*, a man with typical Mexican courtesy, was warmed by the deferential visitor. Bob Grant was waved to a chair and coffee was ordered for him.

He came quickly to the point.

There were now in Don Miguel's peaceful and law-abiding town, he explained, two American criminals of the deepest dye, who had stolen money from the American Army, and who were fomenting bad blood with the *Indios* and inciting them to attack Mexicans and Americans indiscriminately. Therefore, he, Robert Grant, who had been sent by the American military authorities to apprehend these two despicable characters, craved his Excellency's permission to arrest them and take them back to the scene of their crimes. It was to the interest of law-abiding elements of their two great nations to stamp out banditry.

But certainly, agreed the *alcalde*. He would be happy to cooperate with this so estimable representative of the great *Estados Unidos*, and would Señor Grant have another cup of coffee?

Señor Grant would, with a thousand thanks to his Excellency, and would his Excellency object to having the malefactors incarcerated temporarily in the local jail until he, as emissary, could start back with them?

But most assuredly his Excellency would not object in the slightest, provided Grant attended to the little matter of their feeding, His Excellency being desolated that he had no funds available for such a purpose.

During this interchange of courtesies, Tucson and Broken Nose, clearing out the customers in the *cantina*, had taken up positions by the door and single window fronting upon the street, pistols drawn and cocked. Five minutes of tense waiting dragged into ten, ten minutes into half an hour. The two began to grumble.

"Wot in blazes is keepin' him?" Tucson waxed profane.

"Search me!" Broken Nose kept watching that closed door of the *alcalde's* house. "He's tricky! Mebbe he's slid out the back way and is stalkin' us!"

Tucson had not thought of this possibility. He had started to turn away from the door when a sharp voice fell on his ears.

"That's exactly what he did!" Bob Grant's voice rang out from behind them. "Put 'em up!"

THEY whirled, to find themselves looking into the cold blue steel of his pistol muzzle, matched by the even colder blue steel in his eyes.

Their pistols dropped to the floor. Their hands went up. That seemed the wisest thing to do quickly under the circumstances. Grant picked up the pistols and pointed to the doorway.

"March!" he said quietly, and proceeded to herd them, to their immense astonishment, toward the jail house across the plaza. The jail door yawned a wide welcome and the Mexican jailer was jingling his keys invitingly.

Tucson's Adam's apple slid up and down his scrawny throat. "Yuh can't do this to us!" he tried to snarl, but succeeded only in emitting what sounded like a kit-

ten's yowl.

"No?" drawled Grant. "Let's see if I can't!"

Tucson, giving one fleeting glance over his shoulder, looked into the eyes of a man who would welcome any excuse to shoot him, and shambled quickly into the gloom of the adobe-walled jail, followed by his partner.

The door creaked shut. There was the rasp of rusty locks. Bob Grant returned his pistol to its holster, gave the other two guns to the jailer and strode rapidly across the plaza toward the big warehouse behind which he had tethered his horse.

Leaping up on the loading platform, he went inside, demanding to be shown the goods which, he declared, he had come to take back to the border for Dutch Henry. They were neatly stacked, a pile of long wooden boxes and another pile of shorter and stubbier ones.

"Good guns, *muchos cartouches de cobre* (many copper cartridges)!" the foreman said, and beamed.

Enough repeating rifles and ammunition to permit the Apaches to wipe out the white inhabitants of the Territory, if they fell into their hands! Bob Grant was filled with such rage that he felt himself trembling!

CHAPTER VI

Mucho Good Guns

IT TOOK Bob Grant a minute or two to overcome his anger sufficiently to plan a course of action. To leave the guns here would be to insure that the ruthless Dutch Henry would get hold of them, by hook or crook, and that they would end up in the hands of the Apaches. He had a sickening vision of burning ranchhouses, of tortured and scalped white men, women and children, of decent cavalry troopers fighting against these rapid-fire magazine rifles with their pitiful single-shot carbines, and again he shook with wrath.

Without delay he must get these rifles and ammunition through to the troopers. It would be a big factor in beating down the Apache uprising!

There was the question of wagons to transport the stuff. He could use Dutch Henry's own train! But how could he be sure the drivers would obey him? There came the thought of the six cowboys! But the wagon train would not be in for three or four hours yet, and the cowboys might take their own time heading into Fronteras.

It was too great a risk for delay. At any moment word might be brought to the *alcalde* that he was a fugitive from American justice and Grant might be thrown into jail. Undoubtedly word also would reach Dutch Henry, who would take measures to stop him at the border, at least. He had to move fast!

There was the little matter of payment for the rifles and ammunition.

Yes, the foreman answered, they had been paid for. All that was lacking were the invoices. No, the bill of lading would not be enough. Which was why the two glum white men in the jail were suddenly and rudely aroused. Bob Grant stood over them, revolver in hand, the jailer behind him. Before they knew what had happened Tucson had yielded the papers he carried and Grant was gone, marveling at how Dutch Henry and Sergeant Mueller, suspicious of each other, had divided up the papers.

Three heavy freight wagons were standing behind the warehouses. Two more were at the other end of town. In less than thirty minutes Bob Grant had drivers hired, the teams hooked up, and before the warehouse. In another half hour he was on his way, with Tucson and Broken Nose, bound and helpless and cursing, riding atop the cargo in one of the wagons.

An hour out of Fronteras they ran into the incoming wagon train.

The stolid Mexican drivers of Dutch Henry's wagons scarcely glanced at Grant's train, nor did they see him threatening Tucson and Broken Nose with instant annihilation if they let out a sound.

It was noon when a cloud of dust eddied down to show the six cowboys headed by Artie McCloskey and "Wild Bill" Otte. Joyous shouts broke out as they sighted Bob Grant. The wagons were halted and the mules fed as Grant told them the story.

There were deep and fervent curses as he finished.

"That's why we had our run-in with Dutch Henry—it was him that sold the guns to the Injuns that massacred Hank Tilton and his family down by the Gila."

There was some hesitation when Grant called on them to help him through with the precious cargo. They looked at each other, worried.

"We'd be in a mess," admitted Bob Mahoney. "Seein' how the sheriff feels about our goin's on and all."

"I'll be in kind of a mess myself, seeing that I'm accused of theft of government money and killin'!" Grant countered quietly. "Seems this is a time when a good American has to sort of forget his own risks and remember the men and women and children that'll suffer if he don't help!"

There was silence for a while. It was broken by Artie McCloskey's thoughtful tones.

"First we got to get that stuff to the border," he said, "then we got to get it across, with Dutch Henry, like as not, standin' by to drop on us. If we get by Dutch Henry's gang, we still got them Injuns to fight our way through. Last word is they're massacrin' and burnin' and shootin'. But I guess we got to face the music!"

THE OTHER cowboys went to their horses, and the wagons moved out, guarded by six white men, grim and silent.

"Instead of crossin' at the Fronteras road," said Bob Grant, "we ought to head west about opposite Fort Huachuca. There should be some troopers on patrol there. We could turn over the stuff to them."

"Not a chance!" Red Davis shook his head. "The troops at Huachuca have all been ordered out to chase Apaches and to protect Tombstone. Won't be nary a sodger along the border now."

"In that case, Dutch Henry will figger we'll head across there and have his men watchin' for us!" Grant was thinking out loud. "We'd better try to make the eastern side of the Dragoons till we see what's goin' on!"

The other men agreed, and the wagon-train was headed off the main road. Nearing the border, Grant broke open one of the boxes of rifles and an ammunition box, and every man busied himself wiping the grease out of his gun and oiling it.

It was dusk when they came within two miles of the border. Bob Grant halted the train and, with George Mann, rode forward to reconnoiter.

They had scarcely gone five hundred yards when they heard hoofs. Evidently someone was trying to catch up with them, for there was no attempt at concealment. A vague figure loomed in the dusk.

"Ho, Sanza!" Grant called joyously. The Apache Scout, raising his hand in greeting, drew up beside them. "Where have yuh been, Sanza?"

Sanza said he had been to Fronteras to hide his family in the mountains behind that town. Returning, he had run into Chato with the wagon-train and had promptly taken him prisoner and brought him, bound, following traces of Grant's wagons until he caught up. Chato was tied back in the wagons now.

"Chato's white man's name Squaw Charley!" grunted Sanza.

"The devil yuh say!" Grant was astonished, then came a rush of joy. Right behind him in the wagons he had not only the two witnesses to Sergeant Mueller's crookedness, but the sergeant's killer as well! If only he could get them safely to the Army authorities!

Sanza made a sign of warning. The three listened in the darkness that had descended. Clear on the night air came the sound of horses, and scraps of conversation in English. Fifty yards or so ahead a fairly large party of men was passing from east to west.

The sounds died down, only to begin again as many men came riding from west to east.

"They're shore puttin' on a strong patrol!" exclaimed George Mann. "It's a cinch they can't patrol the whole border though. Let's keep movin' till we come to the end of their patrol line!"

It was the only answer. They returned to the wagon-train and headed it east, well back from the international line, with every creak of the wheels reminding Grant that he was getting farther away from that little cavalry post in the foothills of the Dragoon Mountains across the border.

The patrol line was longer and better manned than they had figured. It was

after midnight before Sanza and Bill Otte, scouting in the darkness, came back and reported the way clear to cross the line.

Murmurs of thankfulness went up as the last wagon wheel rolled onto American territory. But Bob Grant knew that the toughest going lay ahead. The Mexican drivers were going to sleep as they drove. Grant rode up and down the line waking them. The mules began to complain and reverberating hee-haws awoke the echoes of the surrounding hills. If any enemy force had been within earshot the noise would have undoubtedly brought it charging down upon them.

"If we can only get through the Dragoon Mountains and out the far side!" said Grant.

The other men shook their heads.

"We'll have to hide out soon's daylight comes, for this country is bare as a billiard table and we can be seen for miles soon's the sun gets up!" Bob Mahoney announced.

"Another day lost!" Bob Grant groaned. "Two days to do fifty miles of rough country—two days before the new moon when the devil busts loose if we don't get there in time!"

The rest looked grave, but nothing could be done about it. As the first dawn rays began to tinge the eastern sky they found a secluded canyon with water. The hours dragged, with men taking turns at watching from the rim of the canyon. All of them reported immense activity, heralded by many dust clouds converging on the Dragoon Mountain through which they must pass.

EACH HOUR, to Bob Grant, sick with the enforced delay, dragged on leaden feet.

Dusk came at last, and the wagon train started its slow crawl up the canyon and out on level once more.

Doug Nichols came up just as Grant drew his first breath of relief. Seeing Doug's face, he sensed bad news.

"We let Tucson and Broken Nose loose, under our guns, and blamed if that Tucson didn't bust away like a jack-rabbit, disappearin' complete when we took our eyes off him just a minute! We seen him headin' out over the canyon but was afraid to shoot for fear of bringin' trouble down on us!"

"Tucson on the loose will bring down all the trouble we can handle!" was Grant's only comment. "We'll have to push these teams hard!"

The crack of the teamsters' whips resounded in the still night air. The creak of the wheels seemed so loud that Grant was certain they could be heard for miles. But they pushed on through the darkness, heading for the Dragoon Mountains.

"If we can't make it all the way we'll head for that deserted mine and cache the stuff there!" announced Grant. "That's as good a pass as any to get through the mountains."

Dawn found them still in the foothills, with the going getting rougher by the minute. They had to halt often to rest the straining mules. Grant watched the light streamers, heralding the coming day, and drove his train harder. If only he could get out of sight, out of the open country and into the mountain pass before daylight!

Ahead of him loomed the dark pass, a narrow-mouthed canyon that could be held by a few rifles if Dutch Henry's men saw them and started in pursuit. But there was still a half-mile of rough, steep going before them when the sun rose in all its brassy cheerfulness.

Shouts came from the two riders at rear of the train. Red Davis pointed to the south. Not four miles away, a cloud of dust was slowly settling, disclosing a large group of horsemen—Dutch Henry's men beyond the shadow of a doubt. The dust cloud rose again as the horsemen changed direction and headed for the wagon-train at a gallop.

The crack of whips and the shouts of teamsters rose above the creak and jolt of the wagons as they rose over rocky ledges and twisted through narrow openings between great boulders, and thudded down into hollows. But daylight had long since come to the plains when the last wagon disappeared behind the outjutting buttes that flanked the entrance to the canyon.

Bob Grant was the last man through. Dismounting, he crept to where he could see the plain below.

A high, thin cloud of dust billowed up, far back on the trail. There were, he figured, a good fifty horsemen in Dutch Henry's gang.

CHAPTER VII

Outflanked!

THE teamsters were for drawing up and resting but Bob Grant waved them on through the canyon, telling Sanza to lead them to that abandoned mine. He sent Red Davis along.

"Get the stuff unloaded and into the mine, Red, while the rest of us hold back Dutch's gang!"

It was becoming evident that they would be lucky to get the stuff into the mine, much less to the cavalry post. They simply would have to take a chance on Apache bands in the mountains.

The rest of the cowboys grimly tethered their horses and took cover where they could see the plain below, where Dutch Henry's force now was clearly in view.

"He hasn't got a single blame scout out!" marveled Grant. "If we hold our fire until the last possible minute and keep our heads down, we can blast 'em!"

It was a conglomerate outfit that came loping along—border riffraff, half-breeds, and dissolute Indians whose craving for firewater made them willing tools to any white man who would supply it. There was a handful of white men, riding in rear, Dutch Henry among these. They followed the wagon tracks like eager hounds on the trail, seemingly unaware of the angry men hidden in the rocks above them.

They were allowed to come on a scant two hundred yards before Grant and his friends cut loose. The vicious spat and crack of the repeating rifles, worked at high speed, loosed devastation among the startled band. Horses and men went down. The survivors milled about, with death striking among them remorselessly, until at last they broke and scattered, every man for himself, with Dutch Henry galloping off to the left.

"That cut 'em down to size!" said Mahoney, as he reloaded his magazine.

It was then that they heard a distant shot up the canyon behind them. It was followed by two more in rapid succession.

"Wagon train's in trouble!" Grant shouted and the group of them streaked to their horses and raced, plying quirt and spur, toward the sound of the firing.

The train had advanced nearly a mile. They finally sighted the wagons and Apaches riding at a gallop, firing at them. At the sight of reinforcements arriving, the Apaches disappeared down a side canyon.

There had been no casualties. The wagons moved on, with Bob Grant keeping a watchful eye to the rear. How long Dutch Henry would delay after the punishment inflicted on his men, there was no way of telling. But another four or five miles would bring the wagons to that abandoned mine, and it was certain Dutch Henry would not let so valuable a prize slip out of his hands without a fight.

It was tough going through that pass, with a dry and rocky creek bed which had to be crossed and recrossed. It seemed to Grant, riding in rear with Bill Otte, Artie and Doug, that the train fairly crawled.

As hour after hour went by and they moved nearer their goal, Bob Grant grew increasingly concerned at the failure of Dutch Henry's crew to put in an appearance in their rear.

"I'll bet that buzzard has circled through the mountains by another trail and is gettin' set to meet us as we come out!" he remarked thoughtfully.

"It shore begins to look like that!" one of the others concurred.

But they were at last in sight of the small dark mouth of that abandoned mine as they turned into the last canyon before descending to the plain on the far side. Posting a man at either end of the canyon, Grant sent the wagons over the stoniest part of ground he could find, up and under the earthen platform outside the mine.

A rough, bearded old fellow in worn corduroys came out with a rifle.

"What goes on here?" he barked belligerently.

Grant explained the circumstances. The old prospector, a border character known as Coot Anderson, nodded, then turned and helped unload the wagons.

It was a race against time, and the men

sweated and hauled, depositing the heavy boxes in the mine tunnel, until in half an hour the wagons were empty. Sanza climbed up through the narrow rear entrance of the mine to keep watch.

The teamsters were waiting for orders and for their pay. The offer of a rifle and a hundred rounds of ammunition apiece more than paid them. But where to send the wagons so the teamsters would not be caught and forced to tell where they had left their cargo!

SANZA, coming down from his lookout place, supplied the only possible answer.

"Dutch Henry's men come the other way!" he grunted.

"How many?"

Sanza spread his fingers seven times to signify seventy men. Dutch Henry had circled through the mountains and swung back to capture that wagon train as it came from the pass.

"Get the wagons turned around, Red," Grant called to Davis, "and head back. Better get Broken Nose and Chato out. We'll leave them with Scoot Anderson at the mine."

Red Davis looked embarrassed. "Forgot to tell yuh. Broken Nose wiggled loose when them Apaches jumped us down the trail. He lit into the chaparral and went hightailin' back toward Dutch Henry's gang 'fore we could drop him!"

Bob did not even flinch at the bad news. "How about Chato?" he asked.

Chato was there, bound in the wagon. Sullen and defiant, he was dragged up by Davis. Grant turned to the old miner.

"Scoot, can yuh guard this buzzard till we get back? We've got to decoy Dutch Henry's gang away from this vicinity!"

"Shore can. I can guard the rifles, too. I got me a load of dinnymite with fuses and caps hid away on a shelf below that hole goin' up to the cliff. I'll shore blast any lobos that try to get in my mine!"

The empty wagons were making good time, the mules at a gallop. The old miner, driving Chato before him, wiping out their tracks with a handful of brush, disappeared into the mine. Sanza joined Grant and the two followed the cowboys on their back trail up the canyon, as the lead wagon disappeared around the turn above.

Grant had written a message which he handed to Sanza.

"Yuh're the one man that can get through to Major Endicott, Sanza!" he said. "I've drawn a little map, but you lead him back with the troops to get those rifles before they fall into the hands of the Indians. I'll be around here, tryin' to guard 'em!"

Sanza looked at him strangely. "You better go away *pronto*," he said. "The major he put you in prison—hang you!"

"It's a chance I have to take." Grant gazed into the distance, then shook himself loose from his thoughts. "Anyway, I've done my best. Get goin', Sanza—time is short!"

Sanza, shaking his head, picked up his reins and started. Grant rode beside him until they caught up with the other riders and the rear wagons. Then Sanza disappeared into a side canyon. Grant explained to the men that it was important for Dutch Henry's men to focus their attention on the wagons and so distract them from too close view of the mine.

Not over three minutes later the advance scouts of Dutch Henry's gang came loping into view at the other end of the canyon. They drew up sharply, yelled, and waved to the men behind them as they saw the last of the wagons disappearing, its team flogged frantically, and the cowboys plying their quirts with all the signs of extreme haste and panic.

Bob Grant waved the others on with the train and, with Artie McCloskey, remained behind. Grant crept forward on foot, watching the far end of the canyon where Dutch Henry's horsemen would come boiling through like a spring freshet.

It was a tense time. If only the horsemen would come straight on without turning aside! As he watched the disorderly mass he felt his heart pounding as the leaders came opposite the mine mouth. The main gang was now beyond the mine mouth, the stragglers strung out for a quarter of a mile behind.

Bob Grant was about to mount when Artie McCloskey saw him suddenly stand rigid. The sound of a distant revolver shot echoed up the canyon.

"There's the devil to pay now!" Grant exclaimed. "What in heaven's name has happened in that mine?"

Deep in the interior of the mine tunnel,

old Coot Anderson had herded the captive Chato! Coot, old and opinionated, had a thorough contempt for half-breeds.

"Now, my scaly-lookin' *amigo!*" he said to Chato, "if yuh think yuh're goin' to squat on yore hunkers watchin' me clean up, yuh got another think comin'!"

HE held his revolver in one hand, and with the other cut the cords that bound Chato's wrists. With the revolver muzzle a weighty threat, he drove the sullen half-breed to clearing the mine tunnel of the hastily dumped boxes, forcing him to pile them neatly against the walls.

Chato, darting a poisonous glance at his captor from time to time, saw the old man seat himself. After a moment or two the half-breed saw Anderson's head begin to nod, Coot being at that age where one dozes off easily. Chato's eyes flicked around the chamber, rested upon a heavy, iron-bound wooden mallet. But Chato did not ease his labors until he heard a faint snore from the old man.

Chato moved with pantherlike swiftness then. The mallet thudded into old Coot's gray head, the miner slumped down without ever opening his eyes. Chato seized the old man's revolver and leaped for the entrance. The main body of Dutch Henry's gang had already passed, the stragglers were strung out along the trail. Chato ran inside the mine, seized a blanket and ran out again, firing his revolver and waving the blanket.

Bob Grant watched in horror as the stragglers checked their horses and shouted. Dutch Henry's men reined in their horses and turned. Three stragglers rode up to the mine. Chato disappeared within, and came out waving two rifles. Savage shouts went up from the horsemen as they converged on the mine mouth.

Artie McCloskey swore fervently. Bob Grant spoke to him. "Ride up and tell the boys to let the wagons go and join me here. Mebbe we can save the guns yet!"

Artie was off like a shot. Grant stood there alone, his face as expressionless as though carved in stone, watching Dutch Henry's crew swarming into the mine.

A flurry of shots and yells brought downward from the canyon behind him forced Grant to tear his gaze from the wreck of his plans. He gave one startled look at what he saw then, ducking low, reached his horse and led it to a small dry arroyo. His last support was gone. Some of Dutch Henry's horsemen had concealed themselves in a side canyon ahead, galloped out and captured the six cowboys!

CHAPTER VIII

Cold Rage Wins

BOB GRANT, filled with grim anger, decided to tackle the proposition alone. He tied his horse then, making his way up the dry arroyo, headed for that rear entrance to the mine on the cliffs.

It was hard going and he had to pause often for breath and to wipe the sweat forming on his brow and dripping into his eyes. At one of these halts he saw one of Dutch Henry's Indians ride into the dry arroyo, and return with Grant's own mount. And he knew that soon an Apache tracker would be on his trail!

He moved on up, taking advantage of every piece of cover, until at last, with lungs laboring, he flung himself down at the cliff top. Knowing the speed with which an Apache tracker could move, Grant wasted little time.

Reaching the mesquite surrounding the chimneylike mine entrance, his eye swept out to the plains below and he stared, wide-eyed. All the Apache nation seemed to be converging on the canyon! From all quarters of the compass long columns of them were closing in. Leading them, his eagle feather gleaming red in the sun, was the tall medicine man, Kla-de-Tahe.

Listening down the opening, Bob Grant heard the distant sound of voices and the stir of men.

If only he could get to that dynamite hidden by Coot Anderson near the foot of the ladder! Grant planned to use that dynamite to wreck the mine and all within it, including himself, if only it would keep the rifles out of the hands of the Apaches!

He went down the crude ladder, trying to avoid the disturbance of earth and pebbles. The voices of Dutch Henry's men seemed to be all coming from the front

of the mine. His cautious foot at last left the last rung of the ladder. He started to turn.

It seemed that the solid earth rose up and struck him. It was a blow that jarred him into darkness with a feeling of falling through illimitable depths. Chato, who had found that rear entrance, and had watched Grant moving along the cliff toward it, had struck him down with the same heavy wooden mallet with which he had downed poor old Coot Anderson. . . .

The next thing Bob Grant sensed was a slow rising through a darkness of pain, and a dull throbbing that sounded like some mighty engine beating in his head. One pain was beginning to merge into another. His arms and wrists, he foggily decided after attempting to move them, were bound behind him with rawhide strips.

Then he heard low-toned talk, dimly recognizing Bill Otte's voice. He spoke a few words, asking what had happened. Other voices answered.

They were all there, except Mac Nichols who had beaten off pursuit and escaped. It was nearly night again—the night of the rising of the new moon!

A loud voice was speaking in Apache at the front of the mine. From beyond came what sounded like the voice of a vast multitude, in wild yells at the speaker's words.

"Kla-de-Tahe is exhortin' the faithful," Bill Otte said wryly. "Looks like they're figgerin' on draggin' us out and torturin' us as the main event!"

"Where's Dutch Henry?" Grant asked weakly.

"He was in here a minute or two ago, seein' if you was conscious. He took yore revolver belt and seemed plumb pleased."

"Next time he comes let's get him!" said Grant.

"How yuh figgerin' to do that?" asked Bill Otte. "We're all trussed up like chickens!"

"Rawhide can be bit through, so get busy!" croaked Grant, and turned his back to Bill Otte who went to work gnawing at his bonds.

From the sounds Grant knew the others were taking the hint. It was slow work, and the voice of the medicine man rose and fell, his oratory bringing bursts of savage yelling at regular intervals.

"He's getting 'em savaged up for the big show—which is us!" said Grant.

SUDDENLY a bulky form loomed over them. "Is that no-account Bob Grant come to yet?" It was the voice of Dutch Henry.

"What if he has?" Grant said quietly.

"Ho! So that tap on the head didn't keep you down long, eh! Too bad yuh kept messin' up in my affairs. I could of used an hombre like you if yuh'd showed a mite more hoss sense."

"That's why you hired Chato to kill me?" asked Grant, and tugged at one tough strand of rawhide that still held.

When train-robbing renegades ride the Lava Hills, Young Doc Burke makes a six-gun diagnosis of outlaw trouble—and prescribes gunpowder medicine!

THE TENDERFOOT DOCTOR

By FRANK RICHARSON PIERCE

A Fast-Moving Action Novelet

FEATURED IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

"Chato's too fond of killin' people," Dutch Henry passed it off. "But mebbe at that yuh'd of been better off. What these Injuns are cookin' up for you and yore friends won't be easy. Wish I could do somethin' for yuh, but my own skin ain't any too safe around here."

A sudden access of cold rage came to Bob Grant. With a single convulsive heave, unseen in the darkness, he broke that last thong of rawhide. But his wrists and hands were practically useless. He worked at them desperately, striving to restore circulation, meanwhile trying to keep his voice casual.

"Yore man Chato killed Sergeant Mueller!" he said flatly.

" 'Fraid so!" commiserated Dutch Henry and sighed, then looked up and listened to a wild peroration of the medicine man's, and the thunderous roar that came surging through the mine mouth. " 'Twon't be long now!" continued Dutch Henry, "They'll be comin' for yuh any minute."

"And after we're done for, you pass out the rifles for savages to kill other white people?" asked Grant. The blood was slowly beginning to dart through his wrists and hands with sharp stabbing pain.

"Well, if I didn't, someone else would," explained Dutch Henry. "Anyhow, the sodgers is supposed to look after the guns." He grinned. "Matter of fact, they're on their way here now."

"So the Apaches can ambush them, I suppose?" Bob Grant's voice was casual. "Well, yuh've figgered it out all right so we can't testify against yuh."

Another roar came from the outside of the mine. Dutch Henry leaned forward, listening. Something happened then. Suddenly Bob Grant rammed his head into Dutch Henry's jaw, smashing from below. A startled gurgle came from the big man. He went backward, with Grant's hand at his throat.

The two men went down, the gross renegade underneath. Other dark forms rose in the darkness to aid. There came *thunk* as of metal hitting heavily into flesh and Bob Grant rose, Dutch Henry's revolver, the gun that had once been Sergeant Mueller's, in his hand. Its butt was stained with blood and covered with strands of hair.

A commotion came from the front of the mine, then three dark forms blocked the light from outside—Apaches who had come to drag their first victim out to the torture fire, the blaze of which was already rising. The savage yelling of the impatient masses outside drowned out all lesser sounds. It drowned out the concerted rush of Bob Grant and his companions who smashed the three startled Indians to the earth and knifed the lives out of them.

Grant rushed back to the rear of the mine, to that chimneylike entrance, while roars of savage blood lust echoed and reechoed in the tunnel. Feeling along the walls, he found the shelf and the explosive, the detonators and fuses, and worked swiftly in the darkness.

The five cowboys sought eagerly and found rifles, their own that had been taken from them.

Yells of impatience came from the darkness of the canyon outside. Another Indian was sent to determine the cause of the delay. Artie McCloskey smashed him down with a rifle butt. Not until afterward was it discovered that the man laid low was Chato, the half-breed.

The tall Kla-de-Tahe went on exhorting, promising painful death to the white men, promising the Indians rifles, and great glory when the soldiers arrived at dawn and walked into their ambush. Kla-de-Tahe was as a man possessed, his voice rising in a sing-song chant to which the red men swayed in savage rhythm.

But suddenly they stopped swaying.

"The white men are doomed!" screamed the medicine man. "I will, with my medicine, bring fire down out of heaven to blast them!"

Something fizzing with strange light went hurtling by his head and curved to fall among the massed Apaches. Another, and another followed.

THERE came three booming explosions. Pandemonium broke out! The air rushed back into the tunnel, knocking Kla-de-Tahe off his feet. Frenzied screams and panic-stricken yelling came from the plain below. Rifles began to bark from the mine mouth to add to the terror.

As though the maddened Indians, striving to get to their ponies, had not had

enough, there came high and clear above the din, the musical notes of "Officer's Call," the cavalry signal in Indian troubles!

Major Endicott was the first man into the mine mouth after the rout of the Apaches. Two troopers, one carrying a lighted torch seized from the torture fire, accompanied him.

"Here it is!" Bob Grant said grimly to himself, and waited for the order to seize him.

But Major Endicott took his time.

"Nice bunch of rifles you gathered in, Grant!" he remarked. Bob said nothing. "Too bad Tucson Jimmy and Broken Nose were killed by some roaming Apaches," the Major went on musingly. "I understand they would have been valuable as witnesses for you."

"Don't need them, sir!" Grant said flatly.

Major Endicott, s t r a n g e l y enough, nodded.

"And Chato?" The major's voice was gentle. "I understand he had some hand in Sergeant Mueller's death?"

The cowpunchers were getting angry.

"Dutch Henry confessed before all of us that he had Chato shoot Mueller!" growled Dan Mahoney.

Major Endicott gazed down at the fallen figure of the great medicine man, Kla-de-Tahe, his eagle feather redder now, with his own blood.

"Did you do this, too, Grant?" asked the officer.

Sanza came out of the shadows, peering from one to the other of the two white men.

"I had a hand in it, sort of," said Grant. "These boys did most of it, with Sanza. All I did was a little shootin'!"

"A little!" Artie McCloskey was indignant. "If it hadn't been for Bob Grant, Major, you and yore sodgers would of been wiped out complete, and every last man, woman and child in the Territory would of been killed! Bob Grant, Major, is the squarest-shootin' hombre in this whole Territory!"

A glint of laughter came into the Major's eyes. He bowed to Artie.

"I had reasoned that out myself, sir," he said courteously, "and had already taken steps to have his name cleared!"

Bob Grant sat down, suddenly and weakly, the end of the strain and worry and danger hitting him all of a heap.

"I was sort of hopin' for that, sir!" he said, then wondered why everyone, including the Major, broke into laughter.

The Southwest's First Cattle Drive

THE first cattle drive in the Southwest took place in 1598, more than two hundred years before the first American cowboys, but the cattle were not being shipped to market.

In 1598 Captain Juan de Onate was commissioned by the Viceroy of Mexico to establish a colony along the northern reaches of the Rio Grande. He started out from Santa Barbara, below Chihuahua in Mexico, with 7,000 head of cattle, 83 well-loaded wagons and about one thousand persons, mostly Indian slaves.

Somewhat south of the present El Paso he crossed the river and ran into a band of 400 Indians. The legend of the savagery of Coronado had grown with the years and these red men wanted no whites in their land.

The battle was brief. The Spanish muskets decided the issue in less than two hours. Two hundred Indians lay dead or wounded, less than thirty Spaniards had been hurt.

De Onate moved on, ever following the Rio Grande, for three hundred miles more, until somewhat to the north of where Santa Fe now stands, he settled and founded San Juan and built the first church in New Mexico.

Like his predecessors, De Onate found that the lure of gold was strong—and he, too, questioned Indians and roved the plains in search of the miraculous cities, but found only Pueblos and a generally peaceful Indian population who were not inclined to be hostile.—*Simpson M. Ritter.*

The YSABELLA

THE Ysabellas have always intrigued me with their magnificence. Truly they are beautiful horses. Some years ago Mr. Fred Gremmel, of Soil Conservation Service, after prolonged study and experimentation included the Ysabellas in one of four foundation basic color groups. This is a point of fact I have been trying to make for a long time. The Ysabellas are more correctly a color group rather than a standardized breed.

For the last decade the colors of this group of horses, together with their size and build, has taken a terrific hold on popular imagination. They are more widely distributed and owned horses than any others. I venture to say there are more Ysabellas than all other types of horses combined. They have come to be the most sought after. Breeders have organized to promote furtherance of each of the groups included under this designation. The word "group" causes less confusion as to definition than "type" as used by horse raisers.

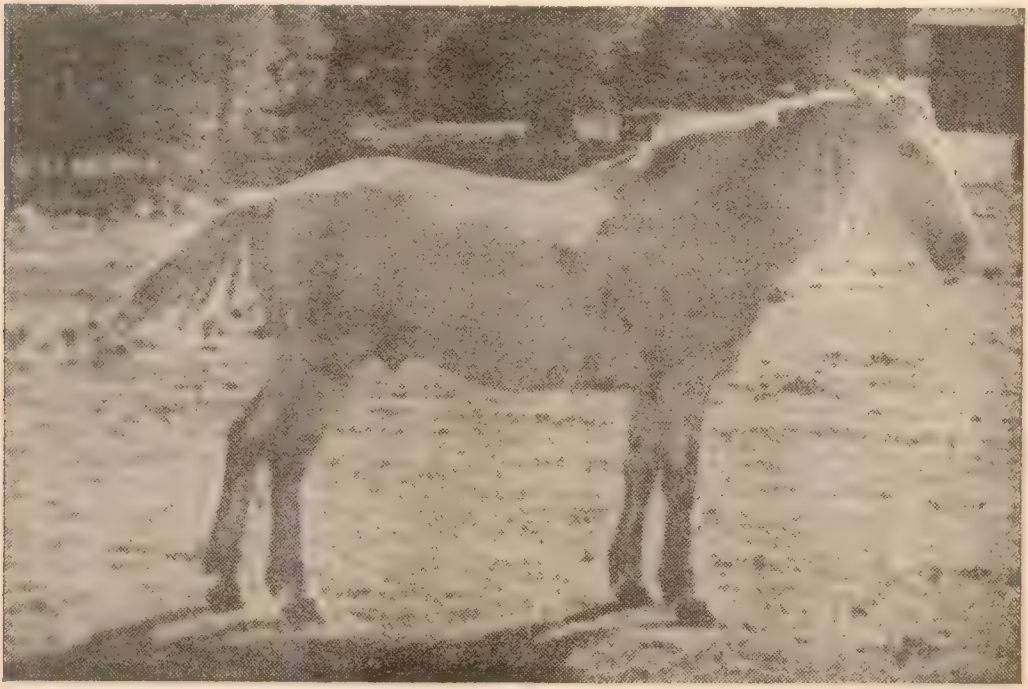
Writers Praise Horses

When I say "popular imagination," I mean just that. Of all the verbs and adjectives possible to the command of the poet and romancer, every one who has written about any of the Ysabellas has waxed glamorously eloquent and then obviously gone into a complete daze of weird, unbounded enthusiasm in accounting for and explaining the Ysabella horses.

Little of this material will withstand investigation. According to all this chatter, the Ysabellas (under other names, of

The Second in a Series

A gray-dappled Ysabella



HORSES

Ideal for dude ranches, this famous and beautiful type of mount is tops in popularity throughout the West!

by GLADWELL RICHARDSON

course) began at least 2,000 years B.C. with the Assyrians and kindred tribes of remote antiquity.

Every important man and woman of history, especially the fabled heroes, owned at least one Ysabella as a personal mount upon which he became a veritable centaur. No one else was permitted to ride it.

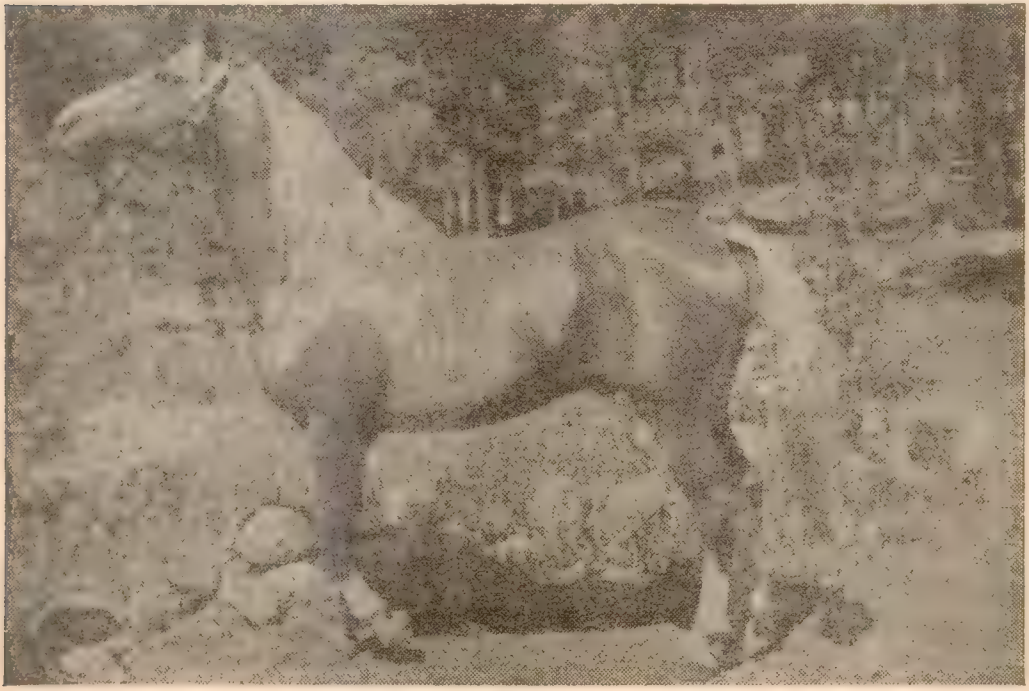
Claim Horses Were "Divine"

The romancers of history claim this same horse as an animal handed down by the Divine Ones to the ruling class alone. It was especially created by the Ocean God Peleus for them. Their colors were considered divine and marked the rank of royalty. During the Crusades they inform us of knights who fought from the backs of gold and gray-dappled Ysabellas. Furthermore, the mighty Genghis Khan possessed them in endless numbers.

The mass of Ysabella stories go on to assert that the Moors rode them into Spain during the invasions of 711-13. Here in this sunny land the breed flowered and became established for all time.

Next on the scene appears the Spanish queen, Ysabella, of Bourbon, who especially valuing them established a famous remunda real. She ordered that no crass commoner was either to possess or ride one of these animals. Their colors, white

"Duke," a registered palomino stallion



and gold, became her special ones in the form of royal dress and adornment. It is this queen who does, however, provide the name for this group of horses, for apparently history proves this point.

Myth About Cortez

Now, we come to something else of which there is more certainty. Cortez, the Ysabella chroniclers go on to report, had one of these famous stallions as a present from the queen with him on his conquest of Mexico. Queen Ysabella even sent over five mares and a stallion, and still later dispatched 1,000 head of these matchless horses to Mexico so that the breed might be continued in her dominion across the seas.

It so happens that Cortez's historian describes the 16 horses brought with him. Only one is of an even similar color and is described as "being of no account." What is more in confusion to the romancers of Las Ysabellas—the queen's horses, Mexico wasn't reached by Cortez until 1519, and the illustrious queen died in 1502 anyhow.

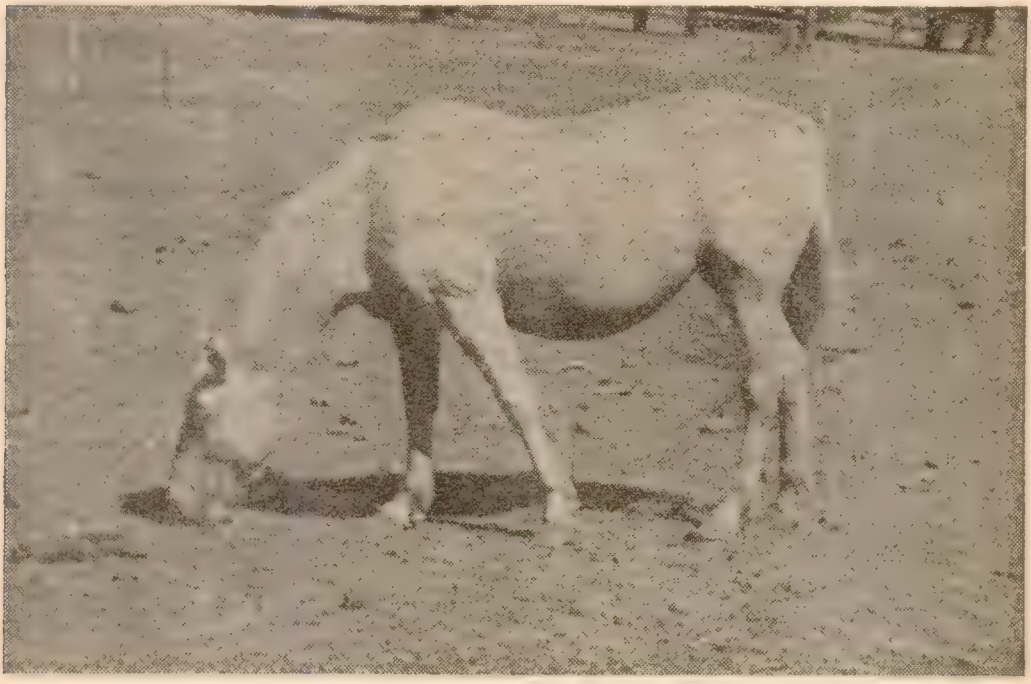
But continuing the fanciful tales we learn that the Ysabellas were dispatched to Spanish California. That only the Don's of Mexico and California were permitted to own them. None was ever sold, but all were handed from one caballero to another as gifts of immeasurable value.

In this instance they mean the gold Ysabellas. With the present horse called "palomino," the Ysabella thus becomes the most written about, speculated upon and the most desired show saddle-horses of any other within the period of written history. Out in the horse raising country of the Southwest and California, if a man owns so much as one horse, eight times out of ten it will be an Ysabella.

Ysabellas Have Peculiar Traits

Important research-scientist breeders are now pretty well agreed with Mr. Gremmel that the Ysabellas compose a color foundation group possessing remarkable dominant factors primarily their own. These same factors contribute to the character of, and influence the markings and patterns of other horse types.

The cowman and the cowboy, largest



A cremolo mare

utility users of horses, have always believed this. They go a step further by asserting the Ysabellas provide certain traits and characteristics easily recognizable wherever found in horse flesh.

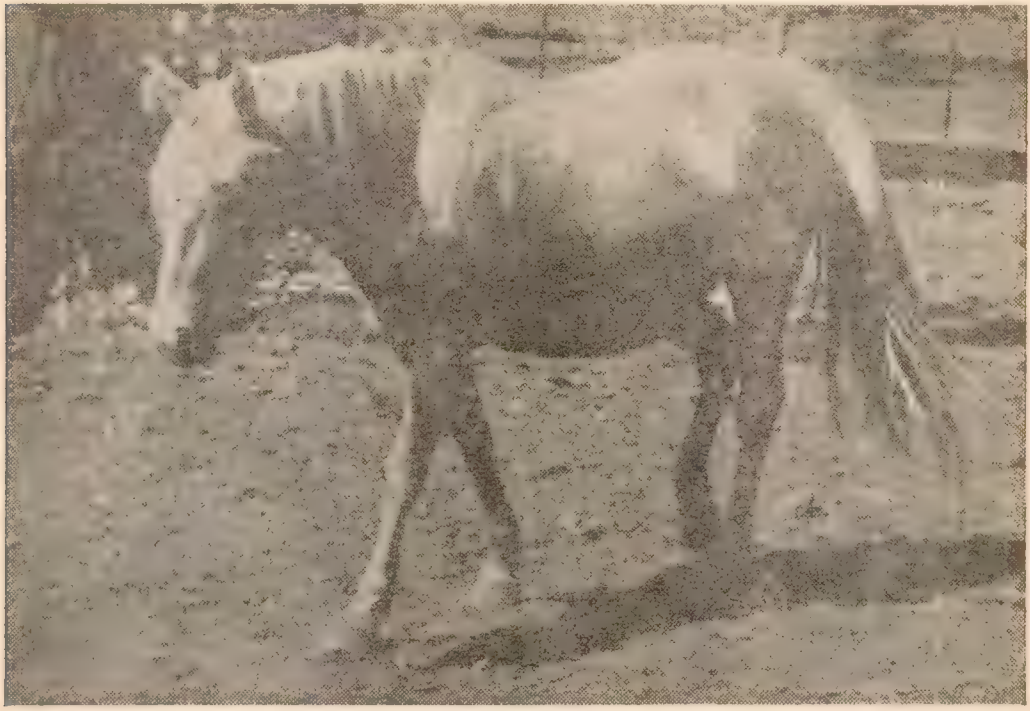
At the same time the cowboy does not greatly care for the Ysabellas as a working horse because of being "more beautiful than intelligent," and more placidly docile, coupled with blocky weight sans the speed found in the Steeldust, for instance.

The type now known and bred as Ysabellas are heavy saddle horses running to 1,000 to 1,250 in weight, and stand around 15.1 hands high, more or less. Not chunky but compact, well rounded quarters, muscled limbs with much flesh. However, their stance is good and the darker Ysabella's are notable for the arched neck of the Arabian.

They are divided into three distinct color groups, "solids," the marking of feet, legs and head having nothing whatever to do with the matter of designation. The lightest colored of the three in this basic group are the pseudo-albinos. They are generally referred to as albinos unless there exists reason for differentation.

Range From White to Cream

They range from a bright, glossy white to the barest cream color, or cremolo. In various localities of the West they are designated as cotton white, satin white, china, cream, ivory and old ivory. These albinos have dark eyes, often actually blue. Some are glass eyed; or zarcos.



Another typical cremolo mare

The second group of coat foundation colors range through the "golds." In them we have the most common, dappled gold, then burnished gold, Osage orange wood gold, rusty gold, glossy tan, bright yellow, and buff. These are the horses now called palominos.

The third group is darker than the second, and is a reddish sorrel horse called "red Ysabella." Though they may show such colors as brown, light brown, dark brown and so on, always there is a very decided red tinge to the coloring of the hair.

The first of these three Ysabella groups,

the albinos, have silver-white manes and tails. Never cotton white or flax colored. The other two are recognizable by having flaxen manes and tails, which on the red Ysabella really makes this equine masterpiece stand out.

In the way of feet they may possess other than light colored hoofs. Or even vertically striped hoofs, as often occurs in the golds. The darker groups may have either all light or dark colored feet, or some combination of them rather than all being of the same color. Except in the first group of Ysabellas, yellow hoofs predominate.

Have Stockinged Legs

Invariably, also, it seems to be a general rule that all except the albino have more or less, socked and stockinged legs. As to heads the darker ones show blazes, stars, star-strips, snips, or chin spots. Even in an albino it is noticeable that the whitest hair on them will be in these places on the head, particularly around the nostrils.

There is a common saying, a downright belief among cowboys that "creams are found with duns." Duns occasionally throw a cream, a fact that cannot be denied.

But if a cremolo is suspected, and it has black points rather than as described above, then it is surely a dun.

Ysabella bred to Ysabella will throw a golden colored foal roughly 50% in all cases. At least 40% can be depended on. The balance of the throw will be either albinos or reds. But a red Ysabella crossed with an albino will also throw the gold colors too. It is this fact that brings on all the arguments with the palomino fanciers, for you can cross several types of colored horses to produce a golden one.

The present day golden horses have been bred up from smaller animals to the same height, weight and other physical standards as the Ysabellas by additions of improved blood lines.

The Ysabellas were apparently standardized in this respect a long time ago. That is, for the type now passing as Ysabellas, including both color and physical specifications. They appear to have reached Texas from Mexico after 1800. Mention is often made in the tales of the fight for Texas independence that Ysabellas were captured from Santa Anna's army. Not particularly caring for these horses the captors sold them to Southern planters.

The Texas pioneers of the hey-day of the great cattle drives northward to railroad shipping points in Kansas, write and speak of the Ysabella as being a compact, heavy saddle horse, of somewhat cumbersome agility and as though it formed a separate type from their other breeds.

In pioneer times when Indians were on the warpath a man would seldom ride any light colored horse. Such a mount made spotting by possible lurking enemies all too easy. Also the white Ysabellas were considered to be real albinos, and thus a weak, thin skinned animal that could not measure up to the work and did not possess the bottom required by the cowboy who was himself as tough as wet leather.

Breeders of the Ysabella today claim it is a much more intelligent animal than formerly. This could be true, as for this and for other assorted reasons they were originally in disrepute with the Western stockman. Quite likely other blood lines, with the more desired qualities, have been blended with what is now called the Ysabella. Certainly they are easily trained as cutting and pick-up horses. However, because of lack of quarter horse speed and get-away they are not generally trained as such.

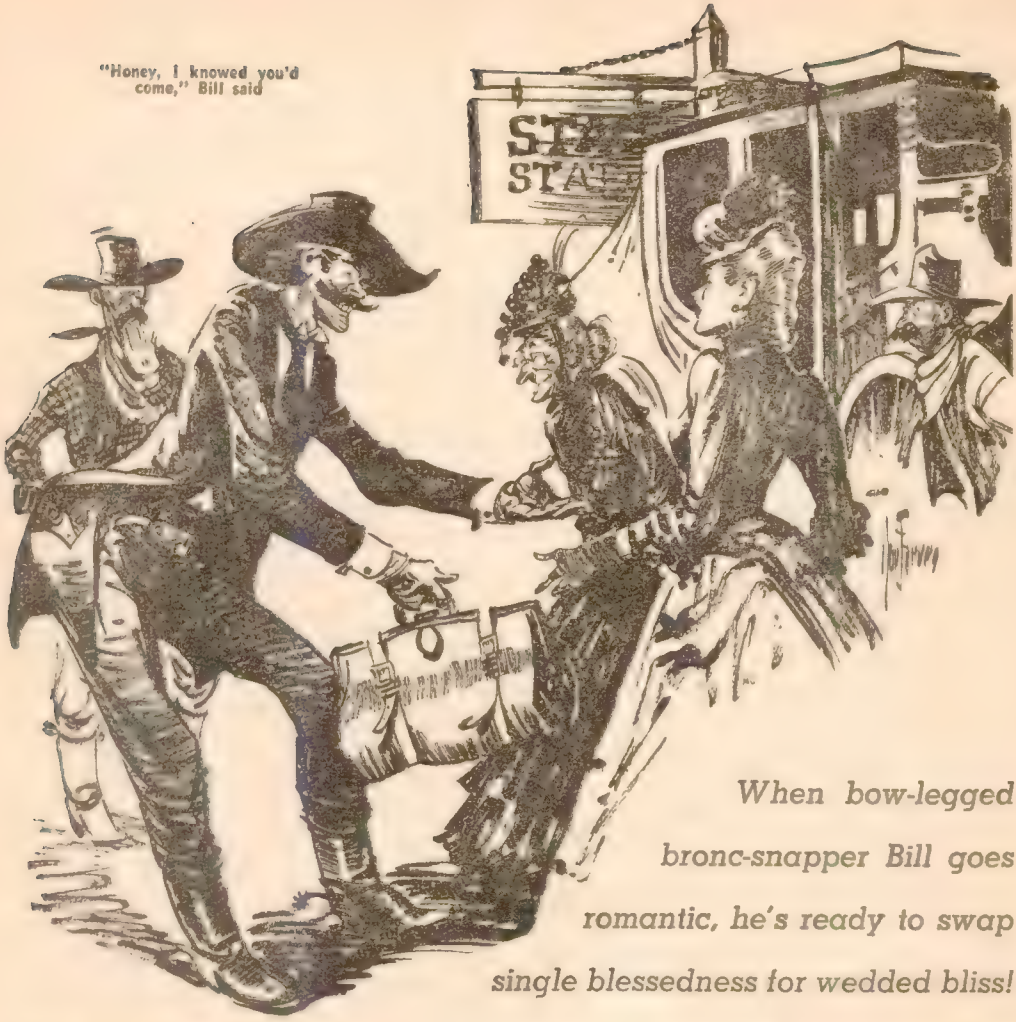
Breed Well With Other Types

They do have traits of character and body build that would go well when crossed with faster breeds, the Steeldust, for instance, and this has been done. Several such animals come to mind, one of them out of tragedy.

This Ysabella was owned by a noted bronco rider of a few years ago, "Slim" Robinson, who was killed accidentally while working as rodeo pick-up man at Flagstaff, Arizona. He told me that this horse, silver-white, was a Ysabella with not more than one-sixteenth steeldust blood. In the smash-up that killed him, the horse was also injured. Despite this it sold at auction for $800.00 to Joe Kellam, one of the few really old time cattlemen left in the Southwest.

Kellam knew his horseflesh. When the

(Concluded on page 45)



"Honey, I knowed you'd come," Bill said

When bow-legged bronc-snapper Bill goes romantic, he's ready to swap single blessedness for wedded bliss!

The Picture Gal Pickup

By WILLIAM F. MARTIN

FOR a place that sets itself up to be an honest cowtown with respectability this Windham, Montana about cuts the cake. The dang place ain't no bigger than a deer fly sittin' on a buffalo bull.

There ain't nothin' here to mark the trail but a few old sand-blasted, weather-beaten false fronts. No places of importance except the Red Calf saloon and Apple Pie Annie's emporium of cookery.

Windham, or surrounding terrain, ain't produced no Presidential timber, said town leanin' stronger more or less to cowpokes. Me, Ollie Rankin, bein' one of said same, and Bill Suttler, a hombre with vast travel experience. No one ever accused me or Bill with bein' overblessed with

brightness or devolopin' activity.

All communities have their offthrows and setbacks, but for sheer all-out ignorance it would be hard to beat this here "Paper Doll" deal pulled off by Bill Suttler.

Bill ain't the worst feller in the world, but he is about the worst one I know to be always gettin' me mixed up in some crazy deal with him. Bill is one of the more sentimental types while me, I'm one of the stick-close-to-home kind.

Havin' been clean out of Montana with circuses and rodeos, Bill naturally gets irked by bein' confined to seventy thousand acres of sagebrush and tumbleweeds. He was in one of his ramblin' moods when he came ridin' in to Pa Harper's ranch and beguiled me to go with him into Windham for a little look see and dust settler.

I don't like to talk about my friends, but Bill Suttler is one long, lean bowlegged bronc-snapper that can guzzle more bug juice than a thirsty camel can water. I was afraid Bill would overdo himself without honest protection so I let him wheedle me into goin' along. My intentions was good, but Bill had ideas of gettin' orry-eyed.

We got into Windham in good season and there wouldn't be no use in denyin' where we spent most of our time, as Bill won't stay no place only at the Red Calf. Bill hung there for a full quart. Eventually I got him out and into Apple Pie Annie's just as that hump-backed swamper with the glass eye stuck his head in the door and bellered: "The stage is comin'!"

Bill was startin' an argument with Annie so I gets behind him and shoves him out onto the boardwalk.

The stage pulls up in a cloud of dust. Zeb Taylor, the driver, climbs down and bellers loud enough to let them know back in Dillon he'd arrived.

"The stage ends here and I'm thirsty," he hoots.

A dude steps out of the Concord in fancy fumadiddle and starts dustin' them off with a newspaper.

Bill lets out a war whoop. "Y-i-ipe. Ollie, lookie what I see!"

If looks could have burned Bill he'da had first degree blisters. Then the dude grins at me.

"Quite Western, this," he says. "Quite Western. Where's the hotel?"

I'll be a dad-ratted road runner if he didn't up and flip that newspaper right smack-dab into Bill's kisser. Instead of Bill goin' for his gun he grabbed up the paper like a kid snatchin' candy.

The dude looks at me, then Bill. "Queer characters in the West," he says.

I always boil when anybody says anything about our community. "Oh, I don't know," I snorts. "The folks here are as good as anywhere else. And get this, smart boy. Just you try and find a hotel."

Apple Pie Annie came out and began pounding on an iron triangle. Nobody ever had to ask me twice to eat. Me and Bill milled in and flopped at the counter. I was appraisin' Annie's pug nose and freckles.

Bill was awful quiet and I cut a glance to see what he was doin'. Danged if he wasn't ooglin' at that newspaper like it was a twenty-case note. I must have been thinkin' out loud about Annie. I do that some times when I'm under heavy stress.

"Danged if she ain't worth ropin'," I says unknowin'.

"Shore is, Ollie," Bill snorts, lookin' at me with calf eyes. "Worth a cool twenty thousand too."

"Yuh're crazy," I tells Bill. "Annie don't own a thing on earth except this two-bit chuck layout."

"Who do yuh think I'm talkin' about, Ollie Rankin?" Bill snapped.

"Apple Pie Annie," I confides, right off the bat.

"Annie, my eye," Bill bellered loud enough to wake up Ham Peters across the street. Ham's been deaf goin' on thirty years.

BILL plunked the newspaper in front of me and pointed to a gal's picture.

"Rattle yore hocks, cowpoke, and take a look at this heifer," he snorts. "She's advertisin' herself. Hoss, riggin's and stock by paper just for the askin', cash throwed in."

I tried to get the paper away from Bill to look at it, but he hung on to it like a steer mired in a bog. That wouldn't have been so bad, but he started blubberin' like a sick cow.

"It really tears my heart," Bill said snifflin'. "She's a poor lonesome woman livin' in Chicago alone. No one to love.

Pinin' to come live in the big open spaces. Ollie Rankin, do you suppose—"

"Do I suppose what?" I asked.

"Ollie," he confided, "I've about used up the reward money for capturin' the bank robber. I could do a lot of work on my homestead if I had that twenty thousand, besides havin' a young wife to cheer me up. She says here she's twenty-one."

I snorted. Why, that dang fool Bill Suttler is forty if he is a day. I never seen a feller hit so hard since that piebald pinto kicked Lige Smith in the rear pasture.

I seen the only way to save Bill's reputation was to get him to the Red Calf, doctor him up, then get him home to the ranch. It cost me four dollars and six-bits to get Bill cured enough to carry him out to the buckboard.

I didn't lose no time in gittin' Ma Harper's groceries and hittin' the trail. That dang Bill sits there wobblin', bobbin' and slobberin' until he dern near tumbled out of the seat head first.

I suggested he bury his sentiments before we reached the Circle-C, or the boys would think he's crazy fallin' for some phony soap advertiser in a newspaper. Drunk as that hair-pounder was, he yanked out his .45 and poked it into my ribs threatenin'. The end of that smoke-pole looked like the mouth of the Bozeman tunnel.

"Lookie here, yuh ornery son of a bow-legged cow chaser," he yells. "When Bill Suttler wants yuh to butt into his marriage propositions he'll let yuh know."

I tried to square it by reachin' down under the seat and producin' a quart of Red Calf special. I pleaded, tryin' to protect him from the wiles of some she-coyote what was tryin' to get money without herdin' cows for it. Tears as big as marbles gushed from Bill's eyes.

"Ollie Rankin," he blubbers, "we've been friends a long time. Let's don't spoil what's been pleasant. What would the future Mrs. Suttler say if she knew yuh'd been tryin' to tempt her man with red, raw liquor?"

If Bill hadn't slept most of the sixteen miles to the ranch I don't know what I'da done. Eventually we got there and I drug him into a bunk.

"Lissen, Ollie Rankin," he threatened. "If you ever utter a word, I'll .45 yuh to cowboy heaven."

"Yuh'd better shed that newspaper before it gets yuh into serious trouble," I advised.

I'll be dog-goned. Ever time I come into the bunkhouse, I'd catch Bill secretly admirin' that paper gal. The way he carried on was a disgrace to honest cowhands. He started shavin' twice a week, and even acquired the habit of washin' in the horse trough before meals. I dreaded the day the boys would start quizzing him about the newspaper gal. Bill just grinned like a Chessy cat and glared daggers at me.

Pa Harder was sure hot under the collar when Bill up and quit. Bill told Pa he had to get onto his homestead to do a lot of representin' and fixin'.

A'course, me bein' hep, Bill didn't pull no wool over my eyes. I knowed right off what he was thinkin' about. It was that heifer in the newspaper, but the boys never said nothin' and I never mentioned nothin'.

I missed Bill a lot, but we finally got the brandin' done and Pa Harper give us ten bucks apiece to do some shoppin' in Windham. We was puttin' on a show in the Red Calf when Bill drove into town with a hayrack. He'd been to Butte and bought a collection of furniture. Even a big green, tin bathtub.

Those half organized rannihans throwed a razzle when they spotted Bill. They joshed him somethin' turrible. Bill was mad as a wet hen when he drug me off to one side.

"Ollie Rankin," he says, "I'll bet two bucks to a yaller dog hide yuh've gone and spoofed them yahoos about me gettin' married!"

"I never said a word, Bill." And to prove it I crossed myself three times with my Durham sack.

Bill glared at me. "Don't you snicker a word, Ollie Rankin," he snapped, "if you love life. The little lady will be here next week on the stage."

"Is she the newspaper gal, Bill?"

"Yep," he confides, winkin', "and she's bringin' her twenty thousand. I writ her about bein' a rich rancher lonesome for love of a good woman."

"Why, Bill Suttler," I said, "she ain't ever seen you! She may not like yore looks."

"Shore has," Bill returned. "I didn't have no picture of myself so I sent one of

a young curly wolf what traveled with a rodeo. I figgered a picture didn't make any difference so long as it was a man."

"Have yuh heard from her recent, Bill?"

"Yep," Bill replied, "she sent me a telegram for a ticket. Sent her a ticket and fifty bucks. Nothin' cheap about little William."

I wished Bill heaps of luck. Even invited him to the Red Calf for some liquid refreshment.

"Cain't do it, Ollie," he says soberly, "but you lissen to this. It's just a little friendly warnin'. Don't say a word to a one of them wranglers ontil I get the Mrs. out to the homestead."

I NEVER said nothin' to nobody, but you can bet a dollar to a sourdough flapjack I was up bright and early stage day and into Windham before the sun had evaporated the night's dew.

Along about ten I saw the shimmerin' heat waves kickin' up dust from the hosses of a bunch of them crazy punchers from the Lazy-D swingin' along the trail. Danged if they hadn't stopped and lured along the boys from the Circle-C.

About two in the afternoon along comes Bill from his homestead drivin' a spankin' new red rubber-tired buggy. The hosses was all decked out with colored ribbons. The Lazy-D doggers and the Circle-C snafflers was pimentoed enough to crave hoss play when they spotted Bill.

I didn't feel so good about then and I ducked back of the Ranch Cafe behind the woodpile. I knowed the first dang thing Bill would think. I'd tipped them off.

The gang started toward Bill whoopin'. Bill met them half way, .45 mitted in each hand. I watched the whole fracas through a hole in the woodpile.

"Back up, yuh mangy pups, before I start sawin' down logs for the undertaker," Bill yelled, loud enough for me to hear. "Where's that stool pigeon, Ollie Rankin. I'm gonna salivate him."

There was murder in his voice if I ever heard it. I kept well out of sight and crawled into a hole. Not that I was afeared, but a whole egg is better than a busted one any time.

Just then the stage came in at a gallop. A fearful murder was nipped in the bud. Bill holstered his sixes and began dustin' off his clothes with his Stetson.

The stage stopped in front of Apple Pie Annie's and old Zeb Taylor climbed off the coach like the Maharamba of Hamjob. He opened the stage door with a sweepin' bow that would have made Sittin' Bull stand ashamed.

I snuk out and got behind the crowd as Grandma Methusalem onlimbered and hit the ground. She was somethin' to look at. Skinny, ugly, and all of seventy-five. She ooed and she cooed, gurgling at them punchers like a dogie mooin' for its ma. The boys snickered and snorted.

Then the purtiest filly I ever seen lit right out alongside old grandmammy. She was somethin' to make a feller's mouth water. Yaller-headed, eyes like blue pools in a mountain brook. She made them rannihans groggy and punch drunk.

Bill was so all-fired wrapped up in the young filly, he never seen old grandma at all. He rushed in like a grizzly grabbin' a hunk off honey. He snatched that satchel right out of the baby doll's mitt. Settin' it down, he throwed them long, ganglin' arms of his'n around her slender waist and shoulders.

"Honey, I knowed yuh'd come," Bill blubbered. "Don't pay no attention to these coarse cow chasers; they're onmannerly. They're ignorant and don't know nothin' no how. Come on, honey, we'll slope out to the homestead."

Bill hadn't no more than got her snaffled when she broke halter, plantin' her fist right smack into Bill's kisser.

That bunch of locoed hair-pounders howled like a pack of wolves.

"Cinch her, Bill! Don't pull leather. Put yore brand on her, cowboy."

They began shootin' in the air. Even old Dad Winters come out to see what was makin' all the rumpus.

I never seen Bill Suttler get so all-fired mad before. He dove for a .45 just as old grandma gave him a look that would have scared a treed bobcat.

"Mister," she squeaked with a voice like a rusty hinge, "I appreciate your royal welcome and I thank your boys for the loud reception, but before you let them shoot off any more fireworks please tell me where I can find the honorable William Augustus Suttler?"

"Grandma," cackled Tom Yates point-

ing at Bill, "that's yor bacon simmerin' over the filly."

Grandma throwed a runnin' loop around Bill faster than I can place my lips to a bottle of forty-rod.

"Oh you dear, dear man!" Grandma cooed. "So well built. So good lookin'. I just know I'm gonna love you turrible."

Bill broke her stranglehold with the same speed, spittin' and slobberin'. Then he turned to the purty gal.

"Who are you, Missy? Ain't you the newspaper marriage gal?"

"I don't know as it is any of your business, you idiotic cowhand," she snapped, "but it so happens, I am the new Windham school teacher. Now, please, who are you?"

"Me!" Bill glared at the crowd. "Miss, I want you to meet the biggest damn fool in the state of Montana."

I was tryin' to sneak off when Bill spotted me. I couldn't run in my high-heeled boots and Bill caught me before I was half way to the Red Calf.

"Hold a minute, Ollie, and lissen to reason," he pleaded, grabbin' me by the shoulder. "If you'll go back and tell that old sea hag the gang is in town celebratin' the funeral of William Augustus Suttler, I'll forget all yore past offenses. Give her this hundred-dollar-bill and tell her that's all there was left of poor Bill's estate."

I got the old crowbait off on the stage, and me and Bill started celebratin' the proceeds of the rubber-tired buggy and furniture until we both got thirty days in jail.

If any of you folks care to write an old trail pard, address yore letter to Ollie Rankin, care of the sheriff, Windham, Montana.

THE YSABELLA HORSES

(Concluded from page 40)

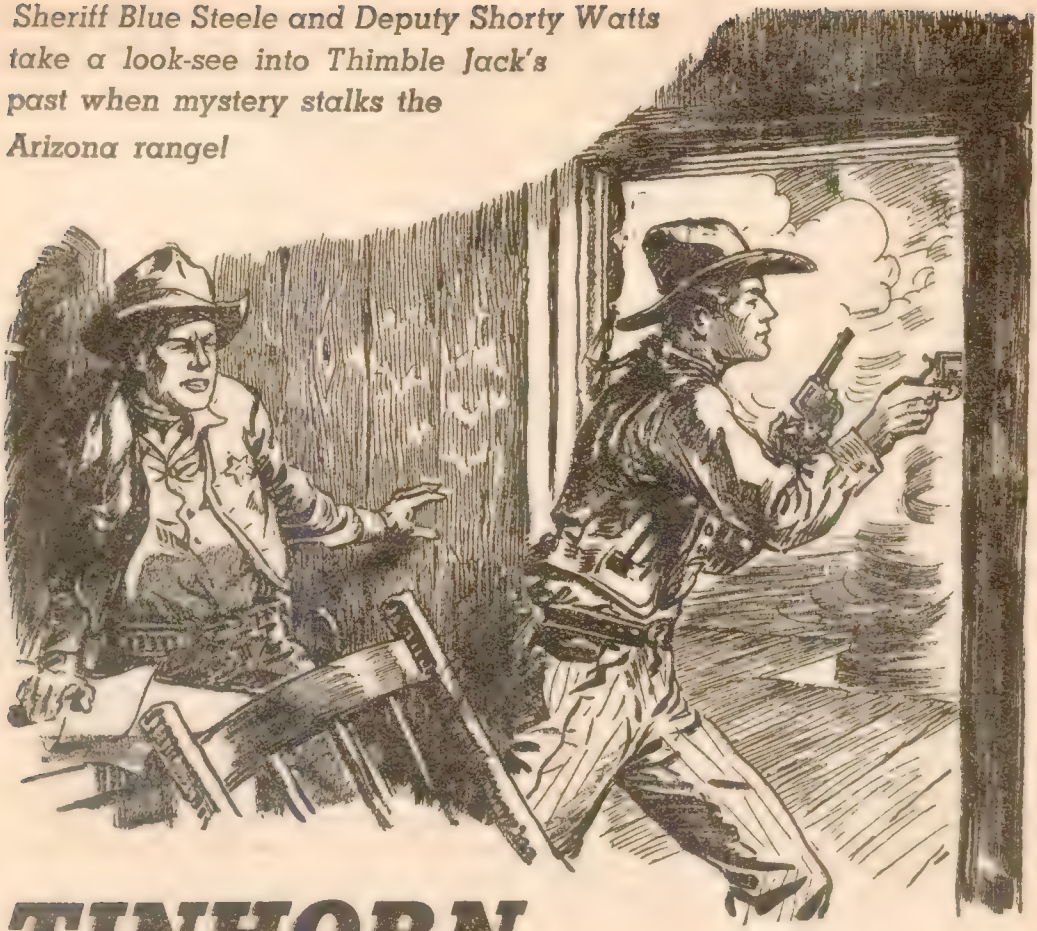
animal recovered, he took it over in his riding string as a personal mount. Robinson had been an expert trainer and the horse possessed unusual intelligence for an Ysabella. It is one of the best cutting horses I have ever seen work.

In working this Ysabella moves fast, with head held high, ears pointed until the quarry is designated. The ears then go forward, the neck straightens and the eyes never leave the animal to be cut out of the herd until it is expertly and quickly shunted in the proper direction.

Jim "Red" Johnson of Blue Water, New Mexico, has a golden Ysabella he trained himself. He says that "it took a little longer" to make this animal into a cutting horse. The same complaint comes from other cowmen; therefore it appears that there is some reason for the cowboy's aversion to using the Ysabella for general cow-punching purposes.

The Ysabella's even temper, a proneness to accept inexperienced riders without cutting up, makes it an ideal animal for "dude" ranches. Since it is also such a beautiful horse these two points furnish the reason we find throughout the West a predominance of such riding stock in the tourist centers.

Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts take a look-see into Thimble Jack's past when mystery stalks the Arizona range!



TINHORN TRAIL

CHAPTER I

The Mysterious "J. B."

THE small, raw cowtown of Painted Post basked in the early desert sun. Beside the barred window of his jail office, Sheriff "Blue" Steele was studying a new copy of the Arizona brand registry when his little deputy, "Shorty" Watts, burst in. The redhead's homely, freckled face shone with excitement as he thrust a copy of a weekly sporting journal across the desk.

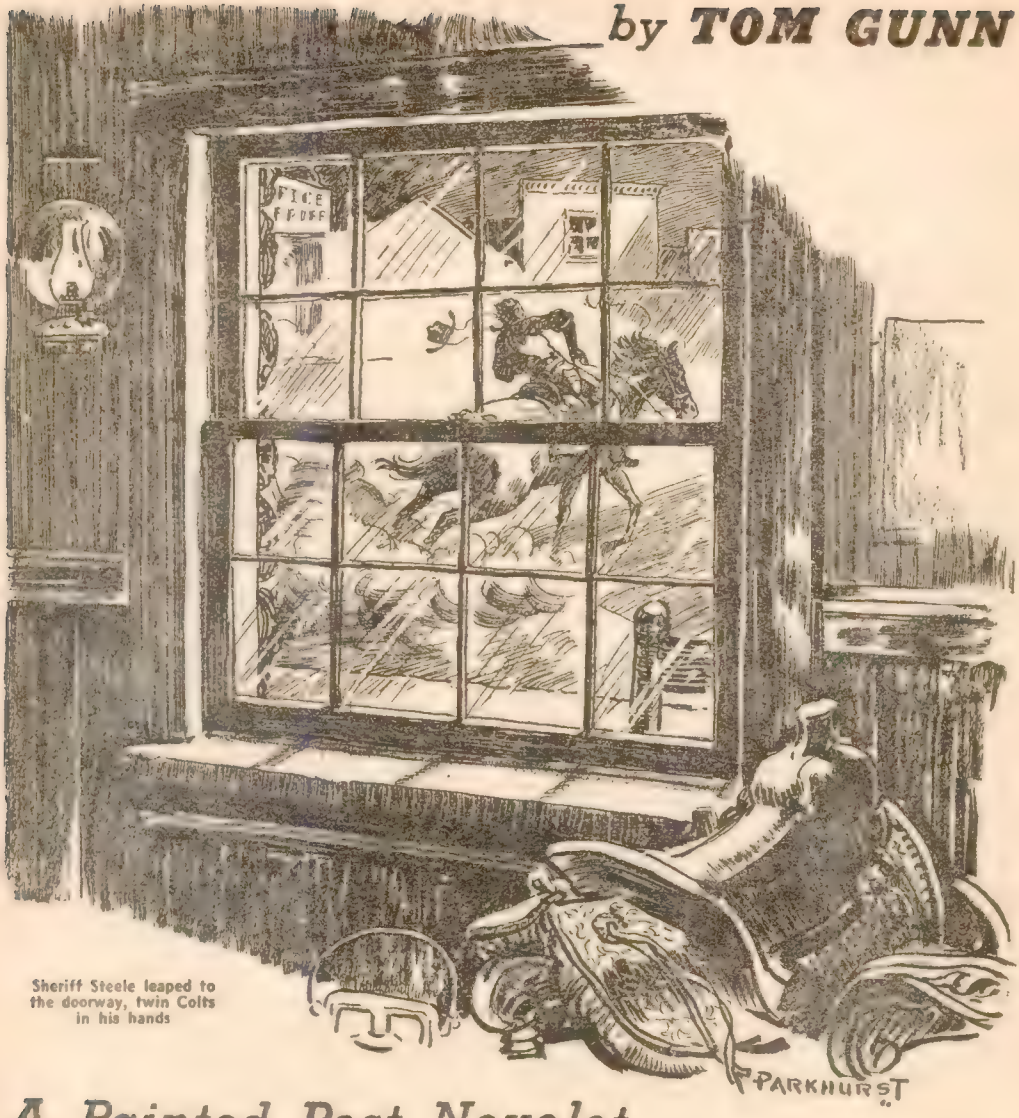
"Look, Sheriff, what d'yuh make out of this?" he piped, as he jabbed a finger at a small ad notice on an inside page.

Blue Steele's eyes lifted from the brand book. He took the pink *Police Gazette* from Shorty's hand and eased his lean six feet back as his granite-gray gaze flitted over the item.

It read:

ATTENTION, BONES BLACK! WHO IS WHITE CHIP? TWO HUNDRED QUICK CASH FOR ANY INFORMATION.

by **TOM GUNN**



Sheriff Steele leaped to the doorway, twin Colts in his hands

A Painted Post Novelet

WRITE "J.B.", PAINTED POST, ARIZONA TERRITORY, AT ONCE.

"Me and you, we know about everybody here in the Border country," Shorty rattled on, "but I never did hear of anybody with them initials, 'J. B.' Did you, Sheriff?"

Steele shrugged one shoulder as he reached for cigarette makings in a pocket of his spotted calfskin vest.

"No, *segundo*. But the Territory is settlin' up fast. I see there's forty new cattle brands registered in the past year."

"Ain't no new brands here in Indian County."

Steele poured dry crumbs of tobacco in a curl of brown paper.

"No," he drawled thoughtfully.

"Ain't no stranger with a name like 'J. B.' along the stage route, neither. I just now asked Magpie to make shore."

"Magpie" Stevens, whose stage linked

Painted Post with civilization, via Cottonwood on the railroad, sixty miles north, was the final authority in such matters. Magpie carried the mail. Steele shrugged again as he touched a match to his smoke.

"Yuh've got me sort o' curious, too, *segundo,*" he admitted. "S'pose we find out who this 'J. B.' hombre is."

"How?"

The sheriff's answer was to take an envelope from a desk drawer and reach for a pen. He wrote rapidly. He folded and inserted a blank sheet of paper before he licked the envelope shut and handed it to his little deputy.

"Chase over to the corral and hand this to Magpie," he requested, "before he starts his up-trip. Tell him to see that this is post-marked 'Cottonwood'."

SHORTY, mystified but obedient, scooted out and made for the corral, close above the jail, where the stage road straggled into town, to become Painted Post's one and only street. He saw the grizzled, wind-blown old stage driver getting his six-horse team in harness. As he hurried toward him, he glanced at what Steele had written on the envelope.

It said simply:

J. B. Painted Post, A. T.

The little deputy grinned foolishly.

"Shucks, what a simple way to find out who this mysterious cuss is!" he mumbled. "Why didn't I think of it?"

Magpie was back at dusk next evening. Steele and Shorty were in the waiting group as his battered Concord stagecoach rattled to a halt in front of the Painted Post Saloon.

The usual routine followed. Magpie clambered stiffly down from his perch, mail sack over his shoulder. He lugged it inside and heaved it onto the bar. "Thimble Jack," the sad-eyed, slick-haired bartender, took charge of it then, as was his custom. He opened the mail sack and dumped out the contents. He passed out letters, one by one, to the small, waiting crowd.

Steele leaned at the far end of the bar, with Shorty at his elbow. The sheriff's searching eyes, shadowed under broad Stetson brim, spotted the envelope that he himself had addressed the day before.

When Thimble Jack picked up that one, he tensed with sudden eagerness. He didn't hand it out. Instead, he ripped it open and impatiently fished out the folded sheet of paper.

His face went as blank as the paper itself when he looked at it. Then he blew the envelope open, shook it and peered into it.

Other members of the crowd, each busy with his mail, had melted from the bar. Steele leaned toward the puzzled bartender.

"Since when yuh started openin' other folk's mail, Jack?" he asked in a low voice.

The bartender gave a startled blink.

"It—it's for me!" he stammered.

"'J. B.', is that you?"

Thimble Jack flushed. In shaky confusion, he tossed the blank letter on the back bar. When he faced the sheriff again, it was with bleak desperation.

"To answer that takes a heap of explainin', Sheriff," he said. "And I'd ruther do it in private."

Steele gave a curt gesture and headed for the batwing door. Shorty trotted after him. Thimble Jack removed his once-white apron and followed.

When he slogged into the jail office, hands jabbed deep in his pockets, it was plain that he was weighted with some problem that galled him. He paced the floor for a while. Steele sat and waited in grim silence.

Finally Thimble Jack quit his pacing and flung a leg over a corner of the sheriff's flat-topped desk. He leaned wearily, gripping the edge hard with one hand, so hard that the knuckles showed white.

"Tell me, Sheriff," he appealed huskily, "can yuh guess what part of the country a man comes from by the way he talks?"

It was a strange way to start explaining that cryptic ad notice in the *Police Gazette,* which lay purposely outspread on the desk between them.

"Sometimes," Steele said crisply.

"All right, then. You've knowed me a long time. How do I talk? Where would yuh say I hailed from?"

"What is this," sputtered Shorty, "a riddle?"

Thimble Jack's sad, pouched eyes swung to him. "That's right," he said heavily. "The riddle of one man's existence, that's what. Here's how it is. I

don't know where I was born, or when. Worse'n that, I don't even know who I am!"

Steele's gaze bored steadily into the bartender's melancholy face, but he said nothing.

"Good gravy!" Shorty exclaimed. "How come?"

"It's a long story," sighed Thimble Jack. "It goes back about twenty years. Back to an Apache raid on a settler's cabin, somewheres up in the Mescalero country. That settler and his family was massacred, all but a small kid, somewheres around five years old."

"That boy, was he 'J. B.'?" Steele asked tersely.

"That pore little button," Thimble Jack said in a tragic voice, "was me! Who I belonged to, I never did find out. But I crave to know, awful bad. There's only one man can shed any light at all on that mystery, if he's still alive, and that's Bones Black."

Steele, about to reach for makings, lost interest in a smoke. He leaned forward, interest sharpening on his bronzed, rugged face.

"Who is Bones Black?" he asked.

Thimble Jack drew a deep breath. Then he burst out with:

"The coldest-hearted, crookedest tinhorn gambler that ever hit the West! It's him that I'll pay to find! Me, that he named White Chip! From which I afterwards took the name I'm knowed by—Jack White! Like I told yuh, Sheriff, it's a long story, and not a happy one. All my life, a nobody! It—it's hard for a man to hold his head up when—when—" He choked up and stopped.

IT WAS a jolting revelation to Steele and Shorty, coming from this man they knew, or thought they knew, so well. The little deputy's quick, warm sympathy flooded out to him. He laid a consoling hand on Thimble Jack's shoulder.

"Shucks, feller, don't take it so hard!" he said. "There's lots worse things than bein' a orphan! Some folks would be plumb tickled to be free of their kin!"

Steele's rock-hard eyes mellowed.

"Yuh've kept this secret bottled up too long," he said gently. "Yuh should of shared it, long ago. That's what friends are for, Jack. The *segundo* and I, mebbe we can help. We'll try—yuh can count on that. Now s'pose yuh cut loose and spill the whole story."

It was easy to see that Thimble Jack was grateful beyond words for that simple but sincere encouragement. His grip on the edge of the desk relaxed. He slid back to an easier position, leaning against the wall, hugging one knee against him. Some of the gloom left his face. He proceeded to unburden himself with a flow of talk beyond his usual meager capacity for words.

"I remember mighty little, before the raid," he said. "How I escaped, I don't know. I woke up to the sound of gunfire, then there was smoke, and after that a long, tiresome ride in front of a man in saddle."

"Yuh mean, yuh can't recollect yore folks or where they came from?" asked Shorty. "Not anything about 'em?"

"Well, there was a big man with a full beard. My father, that could of been. And there was a lovely lady with soft brown eyes and cool hands and she sang to me, and that must of been my mother. Sometimes I've got a dim half-memory of a big white house, tucked away under tall trees beside a creek, with green, hilly country all around. That was where I was born, like as not.

"It's all mighty muddled, but back there sometime there was a stir and hurry around me, then white-topped wagons, rollin' prairie, dust and heat. Just different bits of things like—like a heat mirage. My first clear memory starts with that man who took me in his saddle. Him I came to know as Bones Black. He was tall and thin and wore fancy clothes. The first place I remember with him was a boardin' house in Denver. Bones wasn't around much. I was tended to by different folks. Then there was a hurry-up train trip to Cheyenne. We lived in a flock of places after that, but never nowheres for long."

"How about yore schoolin'?" Steele inquired.

"Never had none. Got a smatterin' of readin' and writin' from a old lady schoolteacher who lived in the same hotel where me and Bones Black stayed. Ain't shore whether that was in Reno or where. But I did get education of another sort from Bones Black.

"First playthings he give me was dice. I learned to count and add thataway. He switched me to cards, as soon as I was able to handle 'em. Learnt me plenty of sharper card tricks, double deals, phony shuffles, and how to bury an ace. When I fumbled, he got mad and whaled me. Said I could help him in his business, when I growed up big enough to set in a poker game. And that's the way things went until I was somewheres around twelve years old. And then—"

"How come Bones Black didn't tell yuh who yuh was?" pried Shorty. "And how he came by yuh?"

"All he said was that when he was headin' west out of Santa Fe, he come to a settler's burnin' cabin. He found me there, and the bodies of a man and woman. He didn't poke around any further, for fear of lurkin' redskins. He vamoosed with me."

"Just where," Steele demanded intently, "did that cabin stand?"

"He promised to show me sometime, Bones Black did. But that time never come. Instead, there came a big blow-up one night in a dive named the First and Last Chance. Bones Black was in a poker game with three other men. I was there, too. He'd put me up to peekin' at the cards held by the others and tippin' him off with signals. When I scratched an ear a certain way, that told him the player held a high pair. Scuffing a foot meant that the player I watched had made a poor draw and so on.

"Well, one of the men got wise. He pulled a gun. But Bones packed a derringer and he shot first. He dropped his man dead. Then he tore out one way and I took off another. That was the last I ever seen o' Bones Black."

"From then on, what'd yuh do?" Shorty asked.

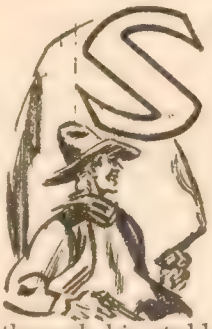
"I was a wanderin' waif. Worked at what I could, anything and anywhere. Anything but cards, that is. I went straight. Bummed all over and took some mighty hard knocks till I landed here in Painted Post. Here lately, I got the idea to put that ad in the *Police Gazette*. It was the only thing I ever saw Bones Black read. But it's been a long, long time. There's a good chance he's dead now. Twenty years since our trails forked. If he's dead, that settles it. I won't ever know nuthin' about myself. That's all of it, Sheriff."

"All," Steele reminded him, "except that yuh haven't explained why yuh call yourself 'J. B.' in that ad."

"That's right, I didn't. Wait, Sheriff. I got somethin' to show yuh why I done that. I'll be right back."

CHAPTER II

Bible Clue



SWINGING from the desk, Thimble Jack hustled out of the office. It was almost dark outside as he hurried down the loose-planked sidewalk toward the saloon. Shorty, spellbound by the strange story, tipped back his hat and ran a hand through his stubborn sorrel topknot.

"Whew! Ain't that the queerest yarn yuh ever heard, Sheriff? What d'yuh think about it?"

"I think, for one thing, that Thimble Jack deserves a heap of credit. For turnin' out to be a square citizen, after such a bad start."

"That's right! Only a saloonkeeper, but he runs the decentest place of its kind on the Border. He—"

The loud crack of a gun snapped off the little deputy's words. He stiffened with dazed surprise, as the report was followed by a hurt cry and the sound of Thimble Jack falling. Then drumming hoofs.

The shot had an opposite effect on Steele. He came out of his chair as though propelled by springs. On a set of antlers, on the wall above him, hung a cartridge-heavy gun-belt with a pair of Colts snug-holstered to it.

Those twin Colts were the trademark of the Sheriff of Painted Post. They had made him the most famed—and most dreaded—lawman in all the Southwest.

He armed himself so fast, there in the half-dark, that Shorty failed to see how he did it. One leap took him to the doorway. The Colts pronged out, past the door frame. Down the street, beyond the saloon,

a fleeing rider was barely visible. The Colts thundered.

Shorty ducked outside in time to see a riderless horse romp off into the rolling desert, empty stirrups flopping. Halfway between, in a limp heap, a dying man's blood was wetting the dust.

"Catch up that runaway, *segundo!*" Steele barked. "I'll 'tend to the rest!"

He ran to the groaning bartender, picked him up bodily and in a moment had him in the saloon, stretched out on his own bar. He gave a rousing shout for Doc Crabtree, whose office and living quarters were upstairs, above the saloon.

The doctor, roused by the shooting, was on his way down, three steps at a time, black satchel in hand. He saw the wounded bartender, under the light from the kerosene lamp above the bar.

"Hullo," he snapped. "Jack got it, eh? Devil of an unhandy time, with me about to go to supper!" He made a swift examination.

"Man," he grunted to Thimble Jack, "you're in luck! I can fix that neat little hole in your right hind leg in no time. Get set—it'll hurt some. How about a shot of your own painkiller, eh? Let's make it two. Could do with one on the house, myself."

He spread out his instruments and briskly set to work. Doc Crabtree, frontier physician, was used to emergencies.

He had slit Thimble Jack's pants leg and was applying a tourniquet when Steele came in, carrying the dead man. He dumped him on the floor.

"Ever see this rascal before?" he asked.

Jack turned his pallid face. He saw a young, plain-featured man in rough, nondescript clothes. His straw-colored hair was unkempt, his sagging jaw unshaven. The open, sightless eyes were cat-yellow.

"N-no!" he gasped. "Who—is he?"

The hard, metallic gleam had returned to Steele's eyes.

"I'd say," he gritted, "that he's Bones Black's answer to yore *Police Gazette* ad."

"Then Bones, he's alive!" For all his pain, Thimble Jack seemed glad. "But why'd he want me done away with, Sheriff?"

"To find the answer to that, our first job is to find out who this sidewinder was."

A search of the dead man's pockets yielded a few dollars, a knife with a broken handle, a twist of coarse chewing tobacco, a brass key, a block of sulphur matches, a ripped map showing the border area of Arizona, and a puzzle made of two horseshoe nails twisted together. That was all. There was nothing to hint at the luckless culprit's identity. Even the sweatband of his hat had been torn out. The gun that had dropped Thimble Jack, Steele laid on the bar.

"Just a plain forty-five six-shooter, same as hundreds of others," he announced. "The fact that this would-be killer took such precautions to hide his name and where he come from—that points to what I just said. He's a hired gunslinger."

"He sure looks the part," sniffed Doc Crabtree. "Steady now, Jack, old socks. Better grab hold of something. This swab'll sting."

THE ordeal was over and the wound bandaged by the time Shorty panted into Thimble Jack's place. His wide, round blue eyes took in everything and came to light on the body on the floor.

"Once through the short ribs and another slug back of one ear," he commented. "Yuh shore done a bang-up job on short notice, Sheriff. I got the hoss corraled. Dun-colored bronc with a outland brand I couldn't make out. Plain saddle, double-rigged, saddle blanket a Navajo weave. Headpiece plain as the saddle, with ordinary spade bit."

"Saddle-bags?"

"Nope. No soogans, no nothin'. The lobo must of been brush-camped somewheres around, waitin' for dark and a chance to skulk into town."

Steele spun empty loads out of his Colts, reloading with pensive, furrowed brow. As he finished reloading and holstered the guns, he said:

"Yuh said yuh had something to show us, Jack. What?"

The suffering man lay with closed eyes, jaws knotted and brow beaded with sweat. His pale lips parted with an effort.

"J-just keepsakes, Sheriff," he said in a weak, hoarse whisper. "They—they're in a cheroot box, in the top tray of that hump-backed trunk in my room upstairs. They're what I came after when—when I ran into that slug."

Steele sent a glance and nod at Shorty.

The little deputy clattered up the narrow, creaky stairs. He was down presently with the cheroot box, of a size that fitted in the palm of his hand. Thimble Jack's head lolled over and his eyes half-opened.

"That's it," he croaked. "Open 'er up."

The Sheriff unwrapped the twine that kept the fragile old cardboard cheroot box from falling apart. He opened it carefully, under the hanging kerosene lamp.

It contained three articles. One was a bullet, evidently of .45-70 caliber, for with it was a paper powder cartridge, the second article such as was used in the first breech-loading Springfields of Civil War time. The third was a hand-carved piece of soft, chalky rock, possibly soapstone. It was slightly oblong, no more than two inches in the greatest of its three dimensions, and had been painstakingly fashioned in the shape of a book.

It was a miniature of the Book of Books, for etched delicately on its top face with some small, sharp instrument were the words, "Holy Bible." Beneath that, in even finer lettering, it said:

J. B., Harper's Ferry, 1862

"Now you know," murmured Thimble Jack, "why that ad was signed 'J. B.', Sheriff."

Brightly observant, Steele studied the trinkets.

"Where'd they come from?" he urged.

Doc Crabtree lifted Thimble Jack's head and pillowed it on his own folded coat.

"That's so's you can talk better," he said. "But save yourself. Make it short, Sheriff."

"They—they're all I ever had to link me with my past," the bartender explained. His words came with less effort now. "Bones Black, he give 'em to me. After I stumbled onto 'em one time, among his things. Told me he got 'em out of the burnt ruins of the settler's cabin."

"That sounds unlikely," was Steele's immediate comment. "This paper-wrapped powder load would of burned in a hurry."

"Well, I hung onto 'em ever since. Sort of figgered that 'J. B.' might tell who my folks were."

"By golly, it could!" yelped Shorty.

To his vague surprise, Steele gave that one-shouldered shrug and looked skeptical.

"This stone Bible is a luck piece, made and carried by a soldier," he said. "That's a pretty safe guess, anyhow. It was a Civil War custom, I've heard." He switched the talk, then. "Now about Bones Black. Describe him."

"Well, he was tall, thin and dark, quick and nervous in his actions, and mean-tempered. He smoked cheroots—this box shows the brand he favored—same brand as the Doc, here, smokes. He wore a ace of spades beard, like the Doc's, and same kind of ribbon-danglin' pinch-on glasses. Doc reminds me a whole lot of Bones Black, as a matter of fact, as I remember him."

"Danged if I get the drift of this palaver!" declared Doc Crabtree, bristling a little. "Who is this party I'm supposed to resemble, anyhow, and what's he got to do with the gunplay here tonight?"

"That's what we hanker to find out," Shorty said. "Now don't butt in. Might be a good idea if yuh chased over to Chow Now's and got supper."

"And leave you buzzards to wear down my patient?" huffed the Doc. "Not much! He's about played out already. Come on, help me pack him upstairs and to bed, where he belongs!"

STEELE and Shorty cradled him in their arms and Doc Crabtree took his feet. As they lifted Thimble Jack from the bar, he said, with a feeble grin:

"No offense, Doc. Besides which, Bones Black, he ain't a spring chicken like you, not any more. Must be fifty, if he's a day."

"Thanks a lot," the Doc said drily. "It happens that I'm going on forty-eight, myself. Easy there now, you fellows. Up we go, and why in blazes didn't somebody build these confounded stairs wider? Devil of a place to lug a corpse down!"

"Not meanin' me, I hope," Thimble Jack protested.

They got their fellow townsman between blankets, assured him that his business downstairs would be taken care of, as soon as the town handyman, "Dictionary" Smith, could be located. And then the Doc rolled down his sleeves and brushed his hands together briskly.

"Now I turn my talents to my job as coroner of Indian County," he remarked.

"That's the way it goes around here. My patients generally show up in pairs—one alive, one dead. Kills the monotony of medical practice. If you boys are headed for the eating home, tell that Chinese to set a ration on the back of the stove for me. I'll be over later."

He shooed them out of Thimble Jack's room and downstairs.

There was a crowd collecting in the saloon when they returned, most of whom had been at Chow Now's eatery across the street when the shooting occurred. They had made themselves generally conspicuous by their absence during the interval that had followed. It was a prudent custom, in the Border country, to seek cover when guns blazed in the street.

But now that the fight was over, men swarmed to the saloon, and Steele was greeted with a babble of excited questions.

For once, he welcomed their presence.

"Take a look at the dead hombre, everybody," he sang out. "Any of yuh seen him before?"

Nobody had.

"He forked a dun with double-cinched saddle," elucidated Shorty.

"Sounds like Texas," somebody commented vaguely.

"Or Montana," added another.

"That's a real big help," Shorty said. "Thanks a heap."

"Don't mention it. Who's tendin' bar while Jack's laid up?"

Shorty picked up the dead man's hat and put it in the center of the bar.

"For the time bein'," he stated, "this establishment runs on the honor system. This here's the kitty and yuh all know the prices. Make yore own change and if anybody gets careless at it, I'll drop around to give the lowdown coyote a free arithmetic lesson. Doc Crabtree will cheerfully answer all further questions. Have a nice time, boys. Me and the Sheriff is hungry, I am."

Steele and Shorty left the saloon, then. But instead of crossing to Chow Now's, the sheriff led the way to the corral. By match light, he read the dun's brand, a running iron job, fairly fresh, on the left shoulder. He recognized it and felt repaid for his careful study of the latest brand registry.

"This gives us some idea where the gun hand came from," he said as the last match flicked out.

"Where, Sheriff?"

"This Diamond Deuce, it's a small new spread up north around Window Rock."

"Who owns the outfit?"

"Ben Golden, the brand book says."

"Huh! Not much of a clue to Bones Black's whereabouts!"

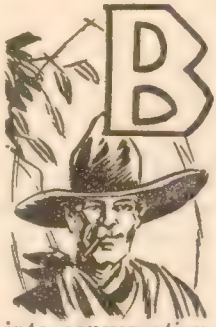
"The name Black doesn't mean much, one way or the other. In the course of twenty years, a tinhorn gambler is apt to change his name at convenient intervals."

A hearty aroma in the air turned Shorty's thoughts elsewhere.

"Gosh, do I smell pork chops? This here is a convenient interval to find out. C'mon, Sheriff!"

CHAPTER III

The Deuce of Diamonds



BLUE STEELE and Shorty headed toward the steamy, lighted windows of the Chinese eating place. Shorty did most of the eating and all of the talking, for Steele had fallen into one of his somber, wordless moods. After repeated attempts to draw him into conversation, Shorty said apprehensively:

"Whatever's preyin' on yore mind, Sheriff, I hope it ain't a gosh-awful ride clean up to Window Rock!"

Steele, musing over a cup of black coffee, shook his head.

"Not yet, *segundo*. I'm addin' up two and two, and it don't come out right."

The redhead's brow crinkled as he stabbed the last pork chop from a platter.

"Come again on that one, Sheriff. I don't savvy."

Steele drummed the counter with his fingers, uncommunicative for several moments.

"If Bones Black sent a man to exterminate Jack," he said then, "it was on account of somethin' in that *Police Gazette* ad. But what?"

"That 'J. B.' thing, mebbe."

"Suppose it was. Why would that rouse

him to kill?"

"Bones Black killed once before to save his own hide."

Steele gave the little deputy a quick, appreciative glance.

"I think yuh hit on something there, *segundo!*"

As he said it, he drew the small cheroot box from his pocket, opened it and spilled out the tiny stone Bible. He picked it up and studied the lettered inscription on it closely. All at once he straightened, with a smothered exclamation.

"Two and two adds up right now! Nice headwork, *segundo!*"

A forkful of fried potatoes halted on its journey from Shorty's plate to his mouth.

"Yuh're still about seventeen jumps ahead of me, Sheriff," he confessed. "Just what yuh drivin' at?"

Steele held the carved luck piece before Shorty's befuddled gaze.

"Look close," he said.

Shorty peered.

"It still says, 'J. B., Harper's Ferry, Eighteen-sixty-two.' "

"Does it? Look again. Somebody with a fine, steady touch etched those words. Somebody else, not so handy at it, or else with a blunter tool, made one small change. Yuh see now, *segundo?*"

"Nope, danged if I do," Shorty admitted, shoveling the potatoes into his mouth.

Steele reached for a toothpick. With it, he indicated what he meant.

"This letter was a 'P' in the first place. Somebody changed it to 'B'!"

Shorty gave a vacant nod. He still didn't see why the sheriff attached such importance to the discovery.

"Why?" he mumbled through a mouthful of food.

Steele's answering shrug might have meant anything.

"I'm still hopin' we don't got to hightail for Window Rock," Shorty said plaintively.

Steele pocketed the cheroot box, got to his feet and reached for makings. His mood of deep, somber concentration had passed.

"No, *segundo.* A better idea is to let Diamond Deuce come to us."

"Yeah? How'll we manage it?"

Steele twisted his quirly shut and lighted it.

"As soon as yuh wrap yourself around that last bite, we're lightin' out for Cottonwood!"

"Cottonwood? Good glory, why?"

Steele exhaled a jet of blue smoke.

"To hurry off a telegram, *segundo. Vayamos,* let's go."

Even to saddle-hardened lawmen, a sixty-mile ride in the dead of night was not a diversion to be undertaken lightly. Shorty grumbled about it as they returned to the corral and got their horses under leather.

"Why can't we send yore telegram, whatever it is and whoever it's to, up on the stage with Mapgie?" he protested.

"Mapgie don't make another up-trip till day after tomorrow."

"Is time that important? What's another day or so when it comes to solvin' a twenty-year-old mystery?"

"Yuh're gettin' lazy in yore old age, *segundo.*"

"An all-night pasear ain't my idea of a bracer!" the little deputy sputtered, as he tightened the cinch on his fractious pinto bronc. "Oh well, I did get fed, anyhow. There's been times when we shagged all over the Border country on empty stummicks!"

Steele stepped aboard his light-footed steeldust gelding and reined past the corral gate, pausing only long enough for Shorty to lift the gate bars back in place.

THE night quickly swallowed them. Up to the Caliente, across the shallow ford, on to Rimrock grade and northward past the Box L Spring they traveled at a steady, mile-devouring pace. It was briskly cold in the high plateau country beyond, and the horses responded willingly, seldom slowing to a jogging trot. At sunrise, they sighted Cottonwood, what there was of it, a windswept settlement rooted around a dull-red railroad station.

They swung from leather at the depot hitchrail and went inside. Shorty hugged a hot stove in the bleak waiting room as Steele strode to the counter and reached for a Western Union pad. He dashed off a brief message and beckoned to a listless operator, a man with a green eyeshade and black sateen sleevelets; who sat at a clattering telegraph key.

"Get this off pronto, Barney," he ordered.

The operator heaved himself to his feet,

stretched and yawned, then shuffled to the counter and sleepily read the message.

"Don't sound so newsy, does it, Sheriff?" he droned. "Expect a answer?"

"Not that you'll know about, *amigo.* Got that signature straight?"

Barney muffled another yawn.

"'J. P.'? Yup, I got it."

Shorty pricked up his frost-reddened ears and scuttled to the counter, in time for a hasty look at the message as Steele sent a silver dollar ringing onto the counter.

It was addressed to "Diamond Deuce, Window Rock", and it said:

DON'T SEND ANOTHER BOY FOR A MAN'S JOB
J. P.

A slow grin spread over his face.

"I savvy what yuh meant now, when yuh said let the Diamond Deuce come to us." Then his grin faded. "But s'pose yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree, Sheriff? S'pose Bones Black ain't connected with the Diamond Deuce?"

"In that case, one Ben Golden will be sort of puzzled, I reckon," Steele drawled easily. "But it's a safe bet that this wire'll reach our tinhorn friend, all right."

"What makes yuh so certain of that, huh?"

Steele crossed to the big-bellied stove, standing wide-legged with back to it, warming his hands.

"*Segundo,* tell me without lookin', what color of shirt is Barney, there, wearin'?"

"Green," Shorty guessed.

"It's tan. How about the old cheroot box I have in my pocket, with Jack's keepsakes—what does the label on it say?"

"What's the object in such durn fool questions?" retorted Shorty, a little rankled.

"To show that most folks, includin' smart ones like you, *segundo,* look at heaps of things without really seein' 'em. Here, let me show yuh."

Steele took the cheroot box from his pocket and handed it to Shorty. The deputy stared at it blankly for an instant. Then his eyes rounded.

The label, rubbed and dim, was still easily readable. It said:

DEUCE OF DIAMOND
CHEROOTS
10 FOR 20C

"Good glory, that's a odd happenstance!" he blurted.

"Not so odd"—Steele smiled thinly—"that a man, in want of a brand name for a small cow outfit, would pick the trademark of his favorite smoke. Hope this little lesson in observation hasn't spoiled yore appetite for breakfast, *segundo.*"

The prospect of eating took the edge off of Shorty's feelings. He gave the hot stove a final embrace, then edged to the door with a bantering grin.

"It's half past breakfast time, all right!" he chirped. "Let's get!"

As they went outside, the operator was clicking off Steele's taunting message to Window Rock.

"Here's hopin' that shot in the dark brings the same quick results," Shorty said, "like them last night, Sheriff."

They put up the jaded horses at the livery barn and saw that they were well fed before they attended to their own inner needs at the Cottonwood Hotel & Cafe.

Their return to Painted Post did not call for haste. But by the time they finished eating, Cottonwood's handful of population was up and astir and the news spread that the Sheriff of Painted Post was in town. So there was a drift of residents toward the hotel café.

SHORTY doted on such attention. But Steele shied from public notice. That was one of the reasons he seldom left his own bailiwick of Indian County. His two-gun renown had spread and he had become one of the fabulous characters of the Southwest.

And so, before the morning was well advanced, they hit the home trail, and were at ease again when the wide open spaces enveloped them. As they rode, Shorty mulled over Thimble Jack's poignant narration of his life history and the events that had followed.

"S'pose this Bones Black does show up, Sheriff," he said reflectively. "How can we prove he was in cahoots with the lobo that gunned Jack?"

"If he shows up in Painted Post, that's proof enough, *segundo.*"

"Yeah, I reckon that's right. Not any too solid proof, though, unless we have proof he got yore telegram."

"Don't lose sight of our main object, *segundo.*"

"Findin' out where Jack came from, yuh mean and who he is? Got any ideas on the subject yet, Sheriff?"

"Not from the way he talks. He's lived in too many places, among all sorts of people. Our bartender, he's a polyglot."

"What's that? A catchin' disease?"

"He speaks with many tongues, which is the speech of the West, made up of dialects and accents from everywhere."

It took a while for that to sink in. When the little deputy spoke again, it was to ask another pointed question.

"How would Bones Black know anything about the youngster he called White Chip? Accordin' to the story, he grabbed him up at that burnin' cabin, after the Apache raid, and neither him nor the orphan kid ever went back."

Steele's agate-bright eyes were thoughtful slits.

"Didn't they, *segundo*?" he said. "I've got a strong hunch yuh're wrong about that."

"Wrong as usual, huh?" grunted Shorty. "Well, then, tell me about this hunch yuh've got."

He knew, even as he said it, that Steele wouldn't voice whatever suspicion he had —not yet. And he was right, for the sheriff switched the subject. They were passing a bluff, where nesting swallows circled and darted in quick, graceful flight.

"Did yuh ever see a swallow on the ground, *segundo*?" Steele drawled idly. "I never did. They feed on the wing. That's why they don't light, like other birds."

"Mighty interestin'!" fumed the redhead. "I never noticed."

"Yuh would, if yuh kept yore eyes open."

"And my mouth shut! That's what yuh're hintin' at, ain't it?"

LOOK FORWARD TO

The Whang Leather Kid

Another Exciting Painted Post Novelet

by TOM GUNN

NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER IV

The Border Gateway

PAINTED Post was unusually situated. The only regular access from the north was across Caliente ford. The river could be crossed at other points, by those familiar with the country, but for the traveler lacking such knowledge, the ford, where the stage road crossed, was the only gateway to Borderland.

So the ford was a strategic point, where Steele and Shorty, on many times past, had brought anxious uncertainty to an exciting climax.

It was starlight when the lawmen splashed through the gravelly shallows and faced their last five-mile lap back to town. And as they emerged onto the far bank, Shorty was not deaf to another hint that Steele uttered.

"Nice campin' weather, *segundo*. Nice camp spot, too, here in the willows. How would yuh like it for a spell?"

"I could think up a better vacation idea, Sheriff," Shorty said wryly.

"This won't be a vacation, exactly. Or even a rest-up. One of us will sleep with one eye open."

"Well, Sheriff, so long as the two of us guard the gates, all right. It's bein' staked out alone that I ain't none enthused over."

"It'll be a twenty-four hour job, and that means the two of us."

With that settled, Steele kneed the gelding into a lope. They reached town quietly, put up the horses and turned in. Next morning they found Thimble Jack cheerful, and on the way to an early recovery, though still cooped up in his room in bed, on Doc Crabtree's strict orders.

The bartender's unidentified attacker was buried that day, without ceremony, in the small, stake-fenced graveyard that was Painted Post's Boot Hill. Dictionary Smith had shown up, and had taken charge at the saloon.

The town's routine resumed its eventless course. But Steele and Shorty, measuring the hours and reckoning the dis-

tance from Window Rock, shared a premonition that this was the calm before an approaching storm. Restless and impulsive by nature, the little deputy found the waiting irksome.

For Magpie's second up-trip after the shooting, Shorty had an accumulation of camp gear and provisions ready. They loaded them onto the stage, unloaded them a half-hour later at the river crossing.

Magpie made no secret of his curiosity about their unusual activity.

"How come?" he queried. "Ain't the air fresh enough in town? Or is it just the coyote in yore natures croppin' out?"

"It's like this," Steele told him with solemn confidence. "The *segundo* likes to whittle. Not enough sticks down below. Out here on the river bottoms is the ideal place to whittle willow whistles, savvy?"

Magpie sent a spurt of fine-cut juice downwind.

"Well, nothin' like askin' to find out," he said. "Wish I had a job myownself that'd let me loaf around and wh-whillow wizzle whizzers—w h i t t l e what-nots, I mean. Well, so long."

Steele cautioned him to keep their whereabouts to himself, as he clucked to his horses and rolled on.

"If he does," Shorty said doubtfully, "it'll be the first time that gabby old galoot ever kept his bazoo buttoned."

"Sometimes Magpie can talk a lot without tellin' much."

"That's right, Sheriff. Well, mebbe it won't matter, anyhow. If Bones Black comes, it ain't likely he'll stop to gossip along the way."

In which surmise the little deputy was mistaken. The following afternoon, a westbound local ground to a stop at Cottonwood and a lone passenger swung down to the depot platform. When the train was in motion again, he slipped into the waiting room. As the rumble on the track diminished, Barney, the station master, despatcher and telegraph operator, was roused by a sharp rap on the counter.

He jerked erect in his chair and saw a gaunt man with piercing, deep-set eyes under the brim of a black hat. The man's hair was black, too, or had been, but was frosted with gray where it swept back beside his lean temples.

"Hotel's across the street, eatin' place in connection," Barney said, anticipating the usual question of arrivals, on finding themselves detached from the rest of the world in small, ugly Cottonwood.

"Thanks," grated the stranger. "It's good to find you so well supplied with information. Perhaps you can tell me more."

"Shoot."

FROM an inside breast pocket of his wide-lapeled coat, the man drew a telegram. He unfolded and spread it open with a long, supple hand.

"This message originated here, I believe. Tell me the circumstances."

Barney rose with a sigh and came to the counter. He looked at it with a yawn.

"What circumstances, stranger?"

"Who sent it?"

"It's signed 'J.P.', ain't it?"

The gaunt man brushed dust from his shoulders, a fastidious gesture that failed to conceal his insistent desire for facts.

"Are you acquainted with the sender?"

"About the same as you are, I guess."

The stranger wasn't getting anywhere with Barney, and didn't know yet whether he was evasive or merely stupid. The deep lines in his face lengthened.

"One more question, my interesting lad. How do I reach Painted Post, and what sort of place is it?"

Barney took a pencil from behind his ear and aimed it south, as though sighting a gun.

"Travel thataway till yuh reach the jumpin' off place and yuh're there. If yuh ain't in a rush, there's a stage in couple days. Otherwise, there's a zoo up the street that does business in the name of a livery stable. Painted Post, population somewhere between seven and eleven, is at a altitude of three thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight feet, is county seat of a big hunk of nowhere called Indian County, and has a healthful, dry climate —except for them at outs with Sheriff Blue Steele. It's cattle country, the main spread bein' the T Bar T, owned by one Judge John Bertram. Anything else yuh want to know? Just ask me."

The stranger's sunken cheeks crinkled with a smile, but his jet-black eyes stayed cold. He came out point-blank with it.

"One thing more. Who is 'J.P.'?"

Barney's eyebrows lifted in mock surprise. "Yuh mean to say yuh don't know?

Gosh, I thought everybody did!"

"Bones" Black pressed his pale, delicate hands together and leaned forward on his elbows, like a hungry vulture scenting a feast.

"Who?" he asked in hushed eagerness.

"Jupiter Pluvius," said Barney, yawning again and returning to his chair.

The other man's brows flattened angrily.

"I'm greatly obliged!" he gritted.

"No trouble a-tall," Barney assured him pleasantly.

Bones Black turned up his coat collar, seized his small traveling bag and stalked outside. He ducked his head to the biting wind that swept the station platform and made long, purposeful strides toward the livery stable. He hired a saddle horse and delayed only long enough for the stirrup leathers to be adjusted to his long legs before resuming his hurried journey to an unknown destination.

In his day, Bones Black had ridden well. Even now, in his late middle years, he was at ease in saddle. But folly and dissipation had taken its toll, sapping his wasted frame of its earlier vigor. Before he had gone one-fourth of the distance, he regretted that he had not chosen an easier means of completing his errand, such as a buggy or buckboard.

At the bluff where the swallows nested, he paused to rest, and to find brief escape from the nagging wind. Out of saddle, he slumped on folded legs in a sheltering cranny. He drew a flask from his bag, tilted back his head and took a long, fiery swig. Then he lit a cheroot.

He had drop-reined the livery horse, ignorant of the strong homing urge of for-hire mounts. It nibbled at the grass, one sly eye on the man. Finishing his smoke, Bones Black had another pull at the flask.

When he lowered it, his horse was dragging rein up the road. He leaped up and ran for it. The horse went into a trot. With a breathless curse, Bones Black quickened his gait. So did the horse. Soon exhausted, the gambler dropped to a walk. So did the horse.

For something like two miles he pursured the animal, which stayed tantalizingly just out of his reach. Finally, in a burst of futile fury, Bones Black gave up the chase. He plodded back to the lee of the bluff, where he had left his bag, dropped to the ground, weary and anxious.

In the fifteen miles he had come, he had seen no sign of human habitation. How far ahead stretched the unpeopled wilderness, he had no way of knowing. His agitation was increased by the fact that it was nearly sundown. Another hour of daylight, then the long, cold, cheerless night. He was without a bite of food, and already the penetrating wind chilled his bones.

He drained the flask and hurled it at a rock, deciding that of the choice of two hardships, trudging back to Cottonwood was the lesser one.

So, with a blasphemous outburst, he pushed to his feet, picked up the bag, wrapped his flapping coat around him and started. He had not taken many steps before his quick ears detected a jangling commotion behind him. He wheeled around. Over a rise, coming at a lively clip, came Magpie Stevens and his lurching vehicle, whooping a ribald song as he braced himself on the lofty seat on top of the Concord coach.

Magpie's raucous rendition of a Border ballad ended in an exclamation of surprise when the tall, dark stranger loomed ahead, one arm upraised. The old stage driver stamped on the brake, tightened the ribbons and whoaed his six horses to a stop.

Bones Black erased his dark scowl with an oily smile.

"Man alive, what luck that you came along!" he sang out. "My horse ran away and I doubt if I could have lasted it out, back to that blasted livery barn!"

"So that's it, huh?" Magpie smirked. "Ain't the first time old Fogarty's cayuses swap-ended on a customer! Climb aboard, pardner! I'll have yuh back up there by dark fall!"

Bones Black set foot on a wheel hub and hoisted himself up beside the driver. Kicking off the brake, Magpie yelled at his team and they were away in a swirl of dust. Out of a corner of a flinty eye, Bones Black sized up the grizzled driver. Magpie surreptitiously sized up his passenger, and scented liquor.

"This is the Painted Post stage, I take it," said the gambler.

"Nope," was Magpie's joking reply. "Cottonwood stage. That is, when I'm headed north."

The joke fell flat. Bones Black reached

inside his coat. Something jabbed Magpie hard in the ribs.

"You're mistaken, old-timer," rasped Bones Black. "This is the Painted Post stage. And as I said, I'm taking it. Here's a good turn-around, right here."

Magpie's gap-toothed mouth flew open. He craned around to look into the cruel, taciturn face of the man at his side.

"Now what kind of a shenanigan is this?" he cried.

"Do as I tell you and gab later!"

Magpie had a tussle, persuading the unwilling horses to head around.

"I reckon yuh realize what it means, interferin' with the United States mail," he remarked, once they were moving south.

Bones Black grated an ugly laugh. "Get over the fool notion that this is a stick-up," he said. "This is a special trip, and if you behave you'll get paid for it."

Magpie's fear subsided, but his resentment increased.

"I wouldn't be throwed off schedule for any price!" he objected forcefully. "Seems like I ain't got the say-so just now, however."

"A sensible attitude, old fellow," Bones Black said jeeringly. "Can't you drive faster?"

"What's all the blamed rush? I've knowed times when certain parties was in a sweat tuh depart from Painted Post. But never in such a gol-darned hurry to get there!"

"I'll answer that one, my obliging friend, by asking you how I can locate a party sometimes known as 'J.P.'"

"So that bobs up agin, huh?" Magpie said rashly.

"Been other inquiries?" Bones Black demanded sharply.

"Ain't no such person!"

"Don't lie to me, you old coot!" The gambler twisted his gun muzzle deep into Magpie's ribs. "I happen to know better!"

"Listen here, mister!" gabbled Magpie indignantly. "I know every son-of-a-gun between the railroad line and the Mexican line! They all know me, too! They know better'n to call me a liar!"

Cold doubt crept into Bones Black's heart. But it didn't show on his gambler's face. Had he come all this way on a fool's errand? Yet, there was that telegram. Also, the *Police Gazette* ad, with its baffling disparity of initials.

"There's a J.B.', then," he stated.

"Is there? Not that I know about! Nearest thing I kin think of is Judge Bertram, but he don't go around callin' hisself 'J.B.'!"

"A young man, this Bertram?"

"White-haired and fifty or more!"

"Not the one, blast it!"

"All right, now we've got that settled, mister, how about unscrewin' that gun out of my ticklish place? I ain't got no gun. Yuh don't need to set there, ready to bang a hole through my gizzard."

CHAPTER V

End of the Trail

DRAWING the derringer away, Bones Black tucked it with both hands between his knees, for warmth. Considering all that he had encountered, since getting off the train, he inclined strongly to the opinion that both the station agent and this stubbly-jawed scarecrow were trying to thwart him with evasions. They knew something, but they weren't telling. But he didn't have a calling hand yet. He needed Magpie to get him to Painted Post. At the journey's end, he could lambast information out of him.

They rode for a while in silence, which was finally broken by Magpie.

"If yuh'd give a man some idea what brung yuh to these parts, chances are I might save both of us some needless bother," he suggested. "Anyhow, it'd give us somethin' to talk about, which'd help pass the time."

Bones Black was tempted to make a long gamble.

"All right, old-timer. Does the name, James Preston, happen to stir up your frail memory?"

Magpie's mouth gaped again, but in the darkness his unwanted companion did not see his surprise.

"Preston! Jim Preston! Holy hocus, yes!"

"Then there is a 'J.P.' at Painted Post!" the other crackled harshly.

"Not by a jugful, there ain't, and never was! Jim Preston, he was an old pardner of mine! Years ago, him and me came West together, from Missoury!"

This time it was Bones Black who was jolted by surprise.

"Have you any idea where Preston is now?"

"Up yonder, in the Mescalero country!"

"You're quite sure?"

"Gold-darn right! He's settled there permanent! Me, I helped bury pore old Jim and his purty wife! Yuh talk as though yuh knowed Jim, stranger."

"We sort of crossed trails," Bones Black said evasively. "How did he come to die?"

"Robbed, burned out an' murdered!"

"That sounds like the work of Indians."

"It looked thataway. Mescalero Apaches was on the warpath at the time. Second meanest people out West, them Apaches."

"Second meanest? What do you mean by that?"

"Worse'n Apaches was certain so-called white men, who marauded and killed, makin' their bloody work look like Injuns done it. Redskins was blamed for a heap of crimes committed back then by such blaggards."

Bones Black's emaciated frame shuddered, partly with the cold.

"You seem to suspect," he said, forcing his voice to steadiness, "that the Prestons were not Apache victims. What reason have you for such suspicions?"

"I'll tell yuh just how it was, mister. The winter before Jim settled on a piece of land in the vicinity of Window Rock, he stayed a spell in Santa Fe. Time was wastin' on his hands, so he took to cards. Purty lucky with the pasteboards, Jim was. So lucky that he cleaned out a perfessional tinhorn to the tune of three-four thousand."

The garrulous old stage driver paused to cram a chew of fine-cut in his mouth.

"Go on!" the man beside him urged, with ill-concealed impatience. "What then?"

"Well, it got around. Most everybody knowed Jim had made a big cleanup. That made him a natural target for robbery."

The stage, finishing a long descent, was on level ground now. In the middle of the flat, the horses slowed alongside a corral and small, dark cabin. Bones Black straightened stiffly.

"Hullo, Painted Post already?"

"Nope. Box L Spring, this is. My relay station. Here's where I change hosses." He set the brake and as the coach ground to a stop, tucked the ribbons around the whip socket and swung down. "Won't take a jiffy," he called out. "Yuh can set or stretch a leg, whichever yuh like."

Bones Black wasn't letting Magpie out of his sight. He leaped down, too, and clung close to him.

"Don't forget this," he reminded grimly, holding the palmed derringer in front of Magpie's nose.

"No need to pull that pea-shooter. I'd blame near forgot about it, matter o' fact. You got no worry, anyhow. Nobody around here. We're on our last jump. Painted Post is only couple hours farther —mostly downgrade from here on."

BONES BLACK pocketed his gun. He flapped his arms and rubbed his hands, but hovered close while Magpie got a fresh team out of the corral and into traces. Soon they were on the go again.

The unwelcome passenger picked up their conversation where it had left off.

"Did you know this Santa Fe gambler that Jim Preston trimmed?" His voice sounded casual, but he waited with fixed tensity for the answer.

"He was a crooked card sharp named Black. Bones Black, he was called."

The other man's hand slipped to the hidden derringer. Magpie was oblivious of the catlike glow that came into his eyes.

"I never met up with him, personal," Magpie added.

The grip on the gun relaxed.

"You—wouldn't recognize him if you saw him, then?"

"Nope. Wouldn't know him from Adam's off-ox. But say, hold on! When we started this palaver, yuh let on as how Jim Preston might be at Painted Post? How come?"

"Oh, just idle curiosity," the stranger said, forcing a short laugh. "Come to think, the Prestons had a brat, didn't they?"

Magpie bristled.

"Brat, mister? Let me tell yuh, little Jim was as fine a youngster as ever was! Me, I was as fond of that tadpole as I'd be of my own!"

"What became of him?"

"I've wondered ever since," sighed Magpie. "We didn't find his body, along with his pa and ma in the burned cabin. Little Jim, he just up and clean disappeared, without sign or trace."

"Kidnaped by the Indians, probably."

"If so, he never turned up, though the Army and others fine-combed the Apache country."

They lapsed into a long silence, as they dipped and rose through chaparral that walled the narrow road, until they plunged suddenly down a series of hairpin turns. At the foot of Rimrock grade they reached the lower desert, where the air was noticeably milder. The team made speed on a long straightaway that led to the Caliente ford. The stranger, so full of questions before, kept his b r o o d i n g thoughts to himself.

"It'd be plumb impolite to ask a man's business, mister," Magpie prattled suddenly, "but what'd yuh say yore name was?"

"I didn't say and I didn't ask yours!"

Undismayed by the gruff retort, Magpie said:

"Mine's Stevens. I freighted in and out of Santa Fe. Who knows, we might of rubbed horns. Me, I got a good memory for names."

"So it seems," was the tart response. "If it makes you feel any better, you nosy old ignoramus, I'm Ben Golden, and I'm retired from active business."

"I savvy. Here for yore health, huh?" Magpie seemed amiable, considering the circumstances. "No wonder yuh was hell-bent south. 'Course yuh wanted to know about this country, and the folks in it. Well, we'll mighty soon be there. Here's the ford."

The leaders splashed into the stream. The coach wheels churned into the gravel bottom. It was about one hundred yards across.

As they neared the opposite, willow-grown bank, Magpie's shrill voice sounded above the turmoil, louder than was necessary.

"Well, Mr. Ben Golden, only five miles more to town! Was mighty nice, talkin' over old times and old 'J.P.'!"

The stage surged out of the water and into sand. Magpie anxiously scanned the road ahead and both sides of it. All at once, a lean figure in a spotted calfskin vest appeared out of cover, shouting a sharp command:

"Pull up! Stop!"

With an ugly snarl, Bones Black snaked a hand inside his coat. Magpie made a move at the same instant. With the ribbons clutched in his right hand, his left snatched a wheel wrench that he had managed to slip under the seat cushion behind him, at the Box L stop. With a quick, backhanded blow, he brought it down hard on the bent elbow of Bones Black's gun arm.

The tinhorn's curse broke off into a bellow of pain as his arm went limply helpless. Magpie drew a thin, wiry leg and gave a forceful kick that toppled his passenger from the seat.

"There's yore man, Sheriff!" yowled Magpie. "Get him!"

Bones Black, alias Ben Golden, was up and around the back of the moving coach before Steele could land on him. In his desperation he had managed to claw out the derringer with his left hand. He aimed upward, as he rushed alongside the stage, beside the driver.

"Trap me, would you?" he raved. "You won't live to wag your loose tongue again, in or out of a courtroom!"

HE AIMED up, trigger curling around the trigger. He couldn't possibly miss. There was a flashing roar.

But it didn't come from the derringer. From the other side of the coach, through the narrow gap in back of the wheel horses, a Colt stabbed fire like the flaming sword of an avenging angel.

A leg crumpled under Bones Black, at the impact of a heavy slug in a thigh. That was scant punishment for the evil he had wrought. Even as he went down, he slanted his aim, underneath the stage, at the shadowy form of Blue Steele.

But fate had not finished with this killer, thief, kidnaper and cheat. Before he could shoot, the right wheels of the heavy old Concord crunched across his thin chest, before Shorty, up ahead, could stop the prancing leaders.

The tinhorn gambler was breathing his last as Steele knelt swiftly beside him. Suffering though he was, Bones Black's stark fear of the Great Unknown surmounted his pain. A lingering spark of consciousness gave him strength to unburden his guilty conscience.

"I—I killed Jim Preston!" It was a rattly whisper.

"And robbed him. To get back your case money?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then burned the cabin to make it look like Apache deviltry!"

"You—you knew! How?"

"Easy to guess it was a robbery killin'. That paper Springfield cartridge wouldn't have gone through a fire. How about that soapstone Bible?"

"Part of the loot!"

"Why did yuh keep it?"

"B-bad luck to destroy a luck piece!"

"Gambler's superstition, eh? But it was hangin' evidence!"

"Th-that was why I changed 'P' to 'B'!"

"When that telegram to Diamond Deuce proved somebody had guessed yore secret, yuh came here to finish a bad job of another killin'! Is that it?"

With his last flicker of life, Bones Black mouthed the question that had taunted him into this rash undertaking.

"Wh-white Chip—it was him?"

"Right, Blackie, and white as they come, for all you did to twist Jim Preston's boy into a crook like yoreself!"

The gaunt man shuddered in his death throes. The last anguished breath left his crushed body. He head lolled over in the sand.

Steele rose to his feet, holstering a warm Colt. His vigil at the ford had been shorter than he had expected. Here was the end of the tinhorn trail. The mystery of a twenty-year-old crime had been solved by sharpness and Colt skill.

It was over now, all but the telling, and the glad unfolding of a new life and a real and honorable identity for Thimble Jack White. Success had crowned another adventure, which would be woven into the wondrous legend that spread the fame of the Sheriff of Painted Post.

Vengeance—or Justice?

That's the choice open to gunslinger Dale Redpath when he rides in the shadow of disgrace and suspicion—and it takes a bitter lesson under flaming guns before he can make the decision in—

THE PRIDE AND THE GUN

by

ALLAN K. ECHOLS

A Thunder-Packed Novelet of the Range Coming in the Next Issue—Plus Many Other Stories and Features!

BOSS of EAGLE ROCK

By
JACKSON COLE

AT first glance Eagle Rock looked like every other cowtown to Jim Young. It had the usual collection of weather-beaten buildings lined on either side of the single, dusty street. There were two saloons, a feed store, a harness shop, a two-story hotel, and a general store along the street, scattered in among the other buildings.

"So this is Eagle Rock," Young muttered as he entered the town from the north end, and rode on down the street, holding his pinto to a walk. "Hot, dusty and nothing special."

Then it dawned on the big, husky young cowboy that there were a few things which made Eagle Rock different from other towns. First, despite the fact it was late afternoon of a warm July day, there were no people on the street. No horses stood at the hitching-rails. The town had a deserted appearance.

From a doorway on Young's left a big, hard looking man appeared and started down the street on the plank walk. A second man, equally tough, popped into view, on Young's right and did the same thing. Neither man apparently was paying any attention to the horseman in the middle of the street.

"All of which is plumb interestin', in an uncertain sort of way," Young decided. "Just like that I've got company."

He deliberately urged the pinto into a faster gait, the two men on either side of the street also moved more swiftly, so they were still keeping up with the horse. They were practically running now.

Young rode over to the hitching-rail in front of the Four Aces Saloon, and halted his mount. The man on that side stopped in front of the saloon, and leaned against the front wall of the building. He seemed a bit out of breath. Across the street the other man had also come to a stop.

In a casual way Young swung out of the saddle. Then abruptly he was behind the pinto, his body shielded by the horse and his gun covering the nearest of the two men.

"Tell yore pard to come over here, pronto," Young snapped. "You'll both live longer that way."

"Hey, Dan," called the nearest man. "Come here, quick!"

The horse shielded Young from possible gunfire from the man who had spoken, but Dan made an excellent target. He

Salty Jim Young Spikes a Cowtown Schemer's Little Game!

came across the street in a hurry. Neither of the gunmen seemed very happy.

"If you gents are tired playin' tag we might have a rousing game of hide-and-seek," Young said dryly. "Or do you figger that might be too rough?"

THE batwing doors of the saloons swung out and a tall man in the black clothing and white linen of a professional gambler stepped into view. He looked at Young and the two gunmen and then smiled.

"Welcome to Eagle Rock," said the tall man to Young in a deep musical voice. "I'm Barton Crawford." He glared at the two gunmen. "It appears to be my destiny to be surrounded by men of low intelligence."

"I think they're dumb, too," said Young. He dropped his gun back into the holster and tied the pinto's reins to the hitching-rail. "My name is Jim Young, and I'm curious as to what the trouble twins had on their minds."

"We ain't twins," said Dan, who was evidently a literal-minded soul. "I'm Dan Bull and he is Joe Nash. We ain't even related."

"Of course we ain't," said Nash. "I'm a lot smarter than Dan Bull."

"That's what you think," said Bull.

"Go away," ordered Crawford impatiently. "Be off with that childish babble, both of you. Leave!"

The two gunmen silently turned and walked back up the street. Evidently when Barton Crawford gave an order it was obeyed in Eagle Rock. which Jim Young found quite interesting.

"Come in, and have a drink, Young," said Crawford. "If you are wondering about Bull and Nash, they have my orders to check on any strangers arriving in town, but they picked a ridiculous way of doing it."

Young followed Crawford in through the swinging doors of the saloon, which was deserted except for the bartender. The two men went to the bar and ordered drinks.

"As you may suspect, I own this town," Crawford said. "Gambling is my profession, but hotel, both saloons and the general store are all my property. At least they are until the fifteenth of the month, which is tomorrow."

"Then what happens?" asked Young.

"I've sold out to a syndicate," said Crawford. "They bought the whole town through their attorney, a man named Adam Dixon. And tomorrow they are supposed to take over Eagle Rock."

"What about the folks around here?" demanded Young. "Do the local ranchers have any objections?"

"They do," said Crawford. "You see Eagle Rock was once part of the range that belonged to an old cattleman, Seth Marshall. He owned the S Bar M outfit. Marshall had a brother who struck oil in Nevada. After that happened Seth sold the S Bar M and left this part of the country to join his brother."

Young found he was puzzled by Crawford's willingness to tell a stranger so much of his business—and then he found the reason for the gambler's actions. Apparently Crawford was greatly impressed by his own cleverness, and enjoyed telling strangers about it.

"What happened to the S Bar M?" Young asked.

"Marshall had given part of the land to the men who established this town fifteen years ago," said Crawford. "Gave them all deeds for the spots in town where they built. Then four years ago I came here and gradually took over the town."

Jim Young had a mental picture of just how a ruthless individual such as Barton Crawford would take over a town. There would be intimidation, gunplay and perhaps even murder before it was over. It was not a pretty picture.

The batwings swung inward and a tall, thin man in worn range clothes strode angrily into the saloon. He looked quickly around and then his gaze centered on Crawford.

"I'm lookin' for you, Crawford," the new arrival said, his voice harsh. "Those two pet rattlesnakes of yores, Bull and Nash, rode out to my ranch early this mornin'. They told me you sent them—that yuh were offering two thousand dollars for my Circle W, and that I had better accept yore price."

"That's right," said Crawford calmly. "Since I'm selling the town, I decided that your ranch would be a nice place to live, Wade." The gambler smiled. "I made you an offer six months ago, you'll recall."

"Shore," said Wade. "You offered me ten thousand dollars for the spread, and I laughed at you. Since then my hay has been burned, and a lot of my stock is missing. And now you have the nerve to offer me two thousand for the whole she-bang."

"The Circle W is worth less now," said Crawford.

WADE'S suppressed rage changed into sudden violence. He drew his gun before Crawford could move. There was a killer light in the rancher's eyes.

"Drop that gun!" Young shouted, his own Colt suddenly in his left hand.

Wade paid no attention. His gun was aimed at Crawford's heart and his finger was tightening on the trigger. Young leaped forward and slapped the weapon out of his hand.

"You don't want to do anything like that, Tom," Young said. "With Crawford not even reachin' for his gun, it would have been murder."

"So you've got a new gunman, Crawford," Wade said bleakly. The wild rage had left him. "All right. I know when I'm licked. I'll sell you my ranch for five thousand dollars—though you offered only two thousand."

"No!" Young said firmly. "You're not sellin' your ranch yet, Tom."

Neither of the other men appeared to notice that it was the second time that Young had called Wade by his first name, and yet it had not been used by Crawford since the owner of the Circle W had entered the saloon.

"What are you talking about, Young?" snapped Crawford. "If Wade wants to sell the Circle W to me why should you stop him?"

"I heard that Wade has owned the Circle W for years," said Young. "He knew Seth Marshall. You're a gambler, Crawford. Why not give Wade a chance? Let him play you a game of poker, and I'll sit in. Wade puts on the ranch against Crawford's five thousand in cash."

"All right with me, if Wade is willing," said Crawford. "I like to be fair about things."

"Suits me," said Wade.

They got cards and chips and seated themselves at a table in one corner of the room. Wade kept looking intently at Young as Crawford dealt.

"Seems like I've seen you somewhere before," Wade said.

"You have," said Young and let it go at that. "Just to make it interestin' I'm puttin' up five thousand against Crawford's money and yore ranch, Tom."

They lapsed into silence as they started playing. Crawford won the first pot, then it was Young's deal, and Wade won. The game went on for some time, and by and by Young and Wade were winning consistently.

Crawford appeared worried.

"You're cheating, Young," Crawford growled abruptly. "Every time you deal, you or Wade draw a winning hand."

"Yuh're the one who is cheatin'," snapped Young as he leaped to his feet. "I'm willin' to bet you've got some extra cards up yore sleeve."

In a moment Young and Crawford were fighting, smashing heavy blows at each other. Young knocked the gambler back against the bar and the bottle and glasses there crashed to the floor. The bartender gingerly edged out of the way. He was a stout bald-head man who was having no part in the fight. Tom Wade was also keeping out of it.

"I remember who you are now," Wade said, drawing back to catch his breath and staring at Young. "You were only a kid when I seen you last—but the family resemblance is shore strong. Your Seth Marshall's nephew."

"Right," said Young. "And head of the Eagle Rock Syndicate."

At that Crawford uttered a roar of rage. A derringer slid out of his right sleeve and there was a stiletto-like knife in his left hand as he lunged at Young.

Young grabbed the gambler by the arm that held the knife. He gave a powerful heave that flung Crawford over his shoulder and the batwing doors splintered as the two men lunged through them. From Crawford's sleeve hide-out, cards fluttered to the plank walk.

Then Young brought the gambler crashing down on the walk with such force that Crawford sprawled there unconscious.

Up the street Bull and Nash had been coming toward the saloon. They had seen what happened. They whirled around and disappeared behind a building.

"Heard that Crawford was makin' it tough for folks around here," Young told Wade. "When my dad and my uncle died, they left me a lot of money and the oil wells. I always liked ranch life best—so I had my lawyer buy this town as the agent for a supposed syndicate."

"But why didn't you let me shoot Crawford?" Wade asked.

"Because I didn't want you to be a murderer," said Young. "I suggested the card game because I figgered that Crawford couldn't resist turnin' crooked if he began losing. He did—and tried to claim I was cheatin'. Then when he realized I was the syndicate, he went wild and tried to kill me."

Up the street Bull and Nash had appeared mounted on their horses and they were heading out of town fast. They were not so dumb that they didn't know when it was wise to leave in a hurry.

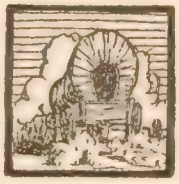
Crawford moaned and sat up. He glared at Young and Wade. Then he slowly got to his feet.

"Looks like I lost more than a poker game," he said. "But I'll get you both for this."

"No you won't," said Young. "Yore two killers just left in a hurry, and I figger they won't be back. If you got any other men in town, they better clear out quick—and you, too. This is my town, starting tomorrow, and I don't like crooks."

Crawford walked silently away. By nightfall he had departed taking the rest of his men with him. Wade and his cowboys were in town now—and Young had decided to run the Bar M ranch again.

"My name is Jim Young Marshall, as you know," he told Wade. "And it shore is good to be home again."



From the Annals of the West

WHEN a newcomer to San Francisco during the gold rush days of '49 and '50 needed a new suit of clothes, he found that it took at least a year and a half for one of the four tailors in town to get around to making the garment. Many of those who struck it rich sent their measurements back East to save time. It took only about three and a half months for their measurements to get to New York by clipper, three weeks for the suit to be made up and three and a half months to be return to California by another ship. That saved them almost a third of the time.

EARLY railroaders were harassed by every type of criminal and holdup man. A vivid picture of the railroading era around 1890 is given in "Whispering Smith," the new Paramount picture in Technicolor which stars Alan Ladd as Whispering Smith, a two-gun special agent who pitted himself against these marauders. Interwoven with a colorful and romantic plot, the spirit and atmosphere of the railroading days is presented with authentic accuracy.

SETTLEMENT of the country west of the Mississippi was accomplished so rapidly that it is a phenomenon of history. Migrations of entire peoples into new lands have generally taken place over a span of two or three centuries—but the penetration of the West took seventy or less years and numbered more than 2,000,000 persons. Between 1810 and 1875 these settlers answered the lure of free land, gold, and a new chance.

THE importance of the "six-gun" in the Old West created an aura of good luck around the numeral "six." Westerners putting up at a hotel always asked for Room Six. If six wasn't available they tried to get Room Sixteen or a room of another number having a six in it. At roulette the number six and its kin always received the heaviest play. Several towns were given names embodying the word "six."—*Mark Knight.*

Buckskin and Iron

Bullets came squalling down toward him

A Buffalo Billy Bates Story

When Billy discovers a fire on the prairie, he smokes out a tough trio of wagon-train crooks!

FAST as his magnificent bay gelding was, "Buffalo Billy" Bates knew that he was losing a race with death. As the horse pounded out across the dawn-touched plains, Billy's tawny eyes watched the wicked flames leap and dance, far ahead. He drummed moccasin-clad heels against the bay's dripping sides, but knew that the horse was giving its best without urging.

"Wagons on fire, sure as sin!" Billy groaned into the wind that blasted his face.

There had been only three wagons.

By SCOTT CARLETON

They were flaming ruins when Billy Bates finally reared his lathered horse to a halt near them. Billy had a Spencer repeating rifle in his sinewy hands, and swept the vast sea of grass about him in almost frantic glances. Then he holstered the rifle, and his tawny eyes turned to the ground. He began walking the bay, lips tightening so that the silky mustache above his mouth seemed to quiver.

"Unshod hoofs," Billy said to himself. "Fifteen or twenty ponies, I'd judge."

Billy circled the flaming wagons, saw where the raiders had fled towards the mountains that loomed, huge and blue, in the morning mists. Suddenly a frown lumped his thin brows, and he trotted his horse out along the sign the raiders had left.

"That's queer," he mused. "The raiders sure stayed bunched-up mighty tight when they pulled out of here. Injuns generally don't—"

Billy's voice broke off. He snapped around in the saddle so fast the fringe of his buckskin jacket flared outward. Then Billy spun his horse and went back towards those flaming mounds that had been three wagons, shoulder-length chestnut hair fanned out behind his head and neck in a shimmering banner.

A man had cried out back there, and as Billy raced back to the spot he felt a cold knot form in the pit of his stomach.

Billy quit his horse before the bay was fully stopped. He darted toward one of the burning wagons, wincing from the heat. But he kept going until he was within a yard of the flames, then reached down, seized the moaning, charred bundle that was the body of a small man. Billy swept the fellow up into powerful arms, turned and sprinted away until he was beyond the wicked heat.

"Poor devil!" he said as he laid the body on the ground.

The man's head showed a horrible wound, where hatchet or tomahawk had struck. The clothing had practically burned off the scrawny body, and Billy thought the man was dead until he saw the blackened face writhe in pain.

"White men!" The words came from puffed lips.

The blackened lips moved again, and Billy bent close, holding his breath as he listened.

"White men!" the dying man moaned, over and over until finally the last tortured breath had shuddered past the black lips.

Billy got up, walked back to where the three wagons were now smoking mounds of wood and cherry-red metal. He circled the wagons slowly, but found no other body. He did find five beds, thirty yards beyond the wagons. The tall young buckskinned man knew a kind of grim relief when the footgear and other clothing beside those five beds told him that there had been only men in the party. And with blood all over the beds as well as the grass around them, Billy knew that the men had been taken by complete surprise, murdered as they slept.

"All but the one, most likely, died instantly," Billy mused. "The way he kept sayin', 'White men'—"

Billy spun on one heel, right hand dropping to the butt of the Dragoon Colt holstered at his thigh. Down the dawn breeze had come the thunder of hoofs, and Billy's tawny eyes saw riders swarming up a shale towards him. He took his hand off the Dragoon, quick elation surging through him as he recognized the riders as United States cavalrymen.

BILLY'S elation was short-lived. The man in the lead was a stocky, red-faced fellow, and suddenly his blue eyes bugged out in an unpleasant way as he saw Buffalo Billy Bates standing there.

"If it isn't the white savage himself!" he said harshly, reining to a halt. "Bates, what are you doing down here? And what's the meaning of this?"

The captain's bars on the stocky man's collar seemed to flash mockingly at Billy. He watched a big, grizzled sergeant and four troopers halt behind the captain.

"Howdy, Parker," Billy said to the captain.

"*Captain* Parker, you confounded renegade!" the officer burst out.

"Parker, you'd better let bygones be bygones," Billy said slowly. "I work for the army, in a way. But I take orders only from Bill Cody, chief of scouts."

"I'm in charge of this sector, keeping an eye on the Comanches!" Captain Parker snapped. "You'll take orders from me—or would you like me to put you in irons?"

"Bill Cody is with General Crook, Parker," Billy said gravely. "The general wanted a man who knows the Sioux Indians sent down here on a special mission. Bill Cody sent me. If you want your tail feathers yanked, and by the general himself, just put me in irons!"

Captain Parker cursed and glared, and finally turned his eyes on the smoldering mounds that had been wagons. Billy began talking quietly, explaining what he could about the burned wagons.

"I was camped off yonder near the mountains, and saw the fires spring up here, just at dawn, Captain," he said. "I got here as fast as my horse could bring me, but caught no glimpse of the raiders. One man was still alive when I arrived. He kept saying, 'White men,' over and over until he died. His body is yonder, towards my horse."

"What kind of a confounded tale are you spinning, Bates?" Captain Parker asked testily. "Do you think I'll believe white men raided Sam Vernon's wagons?"

"I don't know or care *what* you believe!" Billy snapped. "But you seem to have known this outfit, Parker. Who and what were they?"

Captain Parker snorted at Billy, and without answering swung his horse and loped over to the body of the dead wagoner. The big sergeant and the four troopers sighed in unison, relaxing. The sergeant grinned at Billy, shrewd green eyes studying the young scout.

"I've heard of you, Bates," he said evenly. "I'm Luke Hoyt, newly transferred up here from Arizona. What's the captain's peeve at you?"

"I helped his kid sister elope and marry a young farmer she was batty about, two years ago," Billy chuckled. "Parker wanted his sister to marry a wealthy Santa Fe merchant, who was at least twice her age. The captain followed his sister and her husband out to their homestead, and undertook to give the bridegroom a beatin'. I happened to be there, and—er—*persuaded* Parker to get off the place and let the newlyweds alone."

"Knowin' the captain, I can make a guess at the kind of persuadin' you had to use, Billy," the sergeant said drily.

"You knew the men who had this three-wagon outfit, sergeant?" Billy asked.

"That I did," the sergeant nodded. "Scrawny old Sam Vernon was boss of the outfit. Scum, the lot of 'em. They had roulette and other gamblin' devices in these wagons, and peddled whisky to Indians and whites alike, here along the trail. Mostly, they preyed on the big caravans—like the Drake outfit that's due here some time tomorrow."

"What's the Drake caravan, Sergeant?" Billy asked.

"There are seventeen wagons in the outfit, captained by a man named Garvey Drake," he sergeant answered. "They're fine folks, Billy, and are on their way to settle in some place called Roarin' Canyon, yonder in those mountains. Bart Wilk a big fellow I don't like much, is takin' the Drake party—"

"Hold on!" Billy cut in sharply. "A man named Bart Wilk wants those people to settle in Roaring Canyon, does he? Do you know whether or not there's a tall, skinny fellow named Walt Noolin and a stocky, bull-necked cuss named Ed Moody with Bart Wilk?"

"Walt Noolin and Ed Moody are actin' as scouts for the Drake party," the sergeant nodded. "What's wrong, Bates?"

"Wrong?" Billy growled. "Sergeant, a Sioux chief named Squaw Killer and about two hundred squaws, children and braves have been living over yonder in Roaring Canyon for the past four years!"

THE FOUR troopers, who had been lazing in their saddles idly, were suddenly alert, eying Billy Bates attentively. But Captain Rod Parker came cantering back then, his face set in angry lines.

"The body out there is that of Sam Vernon," the captain said grimly. "Where are the other bodies, Bates?"

"At a guess, I'd say they were dumped into those wagons before the vehicles were set on fire," Billy said levelly.

"Bates says there are about two hundred Sioux, off yonder in Roaring Canyon, where those Drakes are headed, sir!" Sergeant Hoyt said tensely.

"You're new here, Sergeant," the captain said grimly. "You're unaware of course, that this Bates fellow is a little more than a savage, himself. In fact, he was growing up with wild Indians when Bill Cody captured him, undertook to educate him. He's as tricky as any red

devil along the frontier, so pay no attention to anything he says!"

"Pull in your horns, Parker!" Billy snorted. "You know Squaw Killer and his Sioux warwhoops are over yonder in Roaring Canyon. You also know Bart Wilk and those two cutthroats of his, Walt Noolin and Ed Moody. Did you warn the Draks party that they're being stung by Wilk?"

"Bates, if you butt into affairs down here, I'll put you under guard!" Parker said harshly. "Do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand," Billy retorted. "You did know that Bart Wilk has sold this Garvey Drake and his friends the idea they are to take up claims in Roaring Canyon, didn't you?"

"I know the Drake party's aims, and their destination," the captain said slowly. "There will be no batch of murdering Indians hiding in Roaring Canyon when the Drake party gets there! Those Sioux renegades murdered Sam Vernon and four other men here, this morning. I shall march on Roaring Canyon immediately and give those blasted Indians a going over, clean them out!"

Billy Bates pulled in a slow breath, fighting desperately to keep his temper under control.

"Captain Parker, this Squaw Killer is a proud man," Billy said slowly. "A little over four years ago, he was accused of clubbing to death a young squaw who had turned him down for another brave. The Sioux named him 'Squaw Killer," and banished him from the tribe. The Indians with him now, believing him innocent, followed him into exile.

"Later, the murdered girl's own husband confessed that he had killed her in a fit of drunken rage, because she broke a jug of firewater he had bought from a whisky peddler. The tribal chiefs apologized to Squaw Killer, asked him to return. But his pride was wounded, and he refused. Squaw Killer is an intelligent man, Captain Parker. He had nothing to do with this raid on these four wagons."

"I say Squaw Killer and his bunch raided these wagons and murdered their owners," Parker said angrily. "I shall act accordingly!"

"And wind up in trouble!" Billy said grimly. "Parker, I was sent down here by General Crook to contact Squaw Killer. With the whole frontier ready to explode with Indian wars after the Sioux victory over Custer, about the most stupid thing you or any other white could do would be to make enemies of Indians who are trying to be our friends. General Crook wanted me to assure Squaw Killer that the white man's army-warriors would give him no trouble of any kind, so long as he stays in Roaring Canyon. I delivered the general's message."

"I don't believe you!" Captain Parker said hotly. "Nobody but a fool would want those blasted Sioux skulking yonder in the mountains with the whole frontier threatened by a general uprising!"

JUST then Sergeant Hoyt, who had been scanning the horizon, cried, "Mister Wilk and the two scouts, Walt Noolin and Ed Moody, are comin', sir!"

Billy Bates jerked around. Three horsemen were coming across the plains at a hard lope. When the three men began reining down, Billy lowered his head, letting the brim of his beaver hat hide most of his face from the mounted men.

"So there *was* a raid up here, eh, Captain Parker?" Bart Wilk's voice boomed out. "Me and Walt Noolin and Ed Moody seen the smoke, and got up here fast as we could. You army fellers get any of the cussed Injuns?"

Bart Wilk was a big man, rawboned and powerfully muscled. He wore a fine black broadcloth coat and trousers, a boiled shirt with a crimson string tie, and a fancy brocaded vest. A spade-shaped beard hid most of his square-chinned, rugged face. He had pale, chill-blue eyes, and Billy Bates sensed those eyes on him suddenly. The scout looked up, and wanted to laugh at the way Bart Wilk rocked back in the saddle.

"Bates!" Wilk's deep voice boomed.

Bart Wilk wore a brace of fancy cap-and-ball pistols holstered under his coat, and his big hands jerked towards their butts. But he checked the motion, eyes shifting under Billy's cold stare.

"The last time we met, Wilk, I warned you that you'd wind up in trouble if you didn't stop posin' as a legitimate land agent," Billy droned.

"If the army wasn't here to pertect you, Bates, you'd git that mouth of yores shut

with a bullet!" Walt Noolin said.

Noolin was built along the general lines of a starved wolf. He had a Dragoon Colt like Billy's own, and was gripping the butt so hard his bony fist looked white across the knuckles.

"When did you take this Bates hellion on as a scout, Parker?" stocky Ed Moody asked the silently watchful captain. His flat, red face twisted into a bleak scowl when Billy Bates laughed coldly.

"What's funny?" he snapped.

"You and Bart Wilk and Walt Noolin are funny," the scout said evenly.

"Bates, what are you trying to do, start trouble?" Captain Parker asked in a sharp voice.

"With bloody-handed raiders on the loose, all of us had better keep calm, I reckon," Billy said quickly. "Wilk, how far from here are your latest victims, the Drake party?"

"Keep a civil tongue in yore head!" Bart Wilk growled. "And don't worry none about the Drake party. They're a dozen miles back along the trail, and well armed. They won't break camp until me and Walt and Ed show up, so they're safe."

"You fellas saw smoke from these burnin' wagons and rode up, eh, Wilk?" Billy asked easily.

"That's right," the big man scowled. "We knowed Sam Vernon and his men was camped up here somewhere, and figgered the cussed Injuns had hit their camp. We come up fast as we could."

"Listen, you!" Billy said coldly. "You've already told me that it is twelve miles from here to where the Drake party is camped. You said you saw smoke from these burning wagons, saddled your horses, and rode up here. You couldn't have seen that smoke before daylight! It has been daylight about thirty minutes."

Billy held Wilk's gaze in a hard stare. "Those must be unusual horses you're on, for after running twelve miles in only thirty minutes, they're not even blowing, and have sweated only a little. On top of that, the wallop Sam Vernon took on the head did not kill him. He crawled out of that wagon. He's lying over yonder, towards my horse. You can see him!"

Bart Wilk's face was white above the thick, black beard, and his big hands were shaking as he inched them towards gun butts. Walt Noolin made a whining sound and hunched his bony shoulders over, the Dragoon Colt slipping up an inch or two as he tightened his grip on the butt. Ed Moody cursed in a strangled sound, looking towards the sprawled, fire-blackened body of Sam Vernon.

"Vernon is alive?" he asked, and there was a shaky note in his voice.

"When I got here, Sam Vernon was—" Billy began, but was cut off sharply by Captain Rod Parker's harsh voice.

"Sam Vernon is very dead, gentlemen!" the captain said testily. "Bates claims that he was alive when he got here, mumbling something about 'white men.' But Sam Vernon was certainly dead when I arrived. My suggestion, Mr. Wilk, is that you and those two men with you return promptly to the Drake wagon train. And please ask Mr. Drake if he will remain camped where he is until I can contact him personally."

BATES saw wagon-train men looking down at him in a way that made his hand itch for the feel of the butt of the Dragoon Colt at his thigh. But those three had their hands away from guns now, and were shaking noticeably, their nerves bucking under reaction from the strain they had been under only moments before.

"I noticed the tracks of unshod ponies over there near Sam Vernon's body," Captain Parker went on crisply. "I want to follow that sign, Wilk, and it may be late today, or even tomorrow, before I can get down to the Drake camp."

"It won't take you long to run that sign down, Parker!" Billy said harshly. "It will lead straight yonder to the mountains, and to Roaring Canyon. Those unshod horses were tightly bunched when they left here, which means they were being driven. I think the unshod horses were ponies stolen from Squaw Killer's horse herd sometime last night. They were no doubt turned loose over towards the mountains. They'll return to Squaw Killer's pastures up in Roaring Canyon."

Billy heeled around, strode away. But he had taken only a few strides when Captain Parker swore savagely, ordering him to halt.

"Where do you think you're going?" the captain asked angrily.

"To make my report to General Crook and Bill Cody," the young scout snapped. "But first, Parker, I aim to follow the sign left by those stolen Indian ponies. I want to know where the men who herded the ponies back towards the mountains switched to their own mounts!"

Captain Parker muttered furiously, glaring at Billy. Bart Wilk and his two henchmen were pale and tensed again as they watched Billy turn his back and walk rapidly to where his horse was standing.

Billy glanced back as he swung up into the saddle, then deliberately swung his horse and quartered until he had picked up the sign left by the unshod horses. Still within plain sight of those who were watching him, he worked out along the sign until he crested a rise.

But once off the sky line, Billy swung his horse sharply to the right, and rode at a stiff lope for a quarter of a mile, watching the crest behind him. The swale he had dipped into swung north and east, and he followed it until he was a mile from where he had entered it, then halted under the sky line and crawled to the crest and peered over.

Parker and the troopers were still there at the smoking ruins of the wagons. Billy guessed they would wait until the embers died out, then search for whatever remained of Sam Vernon's companions.

Billy's tawny eyes swung farther across the plains, and a mirthless smile kinked the corners of his mouth when he saw Wilk, Noolin and Moody loping along the Santa Fe Trail, heading in the direction of the wagon train they were piloting. Billy was not at all surprised when they swung sharply to the north in the first swale they came to, and began riding furiously.

Billy went back to his horse and headed in the general direction he had seen the three suspects take.

"Parasites like that Sam Vernon and his friends seem to have been making considerable money, preyin' on lonely people here along the Santa Fe Trail," the young scout mused aloud. "Bart Wilk and his two pals probably got a rich haul when they murdered Sam Vernon and those other four, this mornin'. They hid the loot out here somewhere, no doubt. And now they are worried, fearin' I'll spell out the sign they probably didn't cover any too well, and find their cache."

To Billy, that seemed a logical explanation to the way the three men were skittering off towards cedar brakes along the base of the great mountains that reared majestically above the plains. He kept them in sight a good bit of the time, crowding in closer when they got into the first low hills.

He saw them go into a crooked canyon that had a lot of cedar thickets along the sides and bottom, and began scowling uneasily, sharp eyes raking the ridges that reared up above the brushy gorge.

IT WOULD be dangerous, but Billy had no alternative but to follow them into the draw, and he slowed his horse to a cautious walk as he rode in between the tall, barren-topped ridges. Here in the defile, however, were plenty of cedar thickets, and Billy proceeded at a cautious walk, keeping his horse off rocky rubble that would send out warning sounds.

"If I could nail those three with the loot they're bound to have taken out of those wagons this mornin', Rod Parker would have to admit that Squaw Killer and his bunch had nothin' to do with that raid on the Sam Vernon wagons," the scout muttered.

Billy's uneasy grumbling ended abruptly. From somewhere in the dense thickets up canyon from him came the sound of horses, traveling fast.

The scout reined to a halt, surprise in his tawny eyes when he realized that the riders were coming towards him. Suddenly Billy's jaw sagged, for he caught a flash of blue cloth and a campaign hat through the thick brush.

"Troopers!" he grunted. "Parker must have had a patrol out here. Maybe I'd better— Hey, cut that out!"

Billy's last words were a ringing yell of mingled anger and fright, knifing through the roar of a carbine. The bullet had slid past his neck so close his long flowing hair was moved aside.

The scout's heels slammed against his mount's sides, jumping the horse towards a thicket. And the action probably saved both their lives, Billy knew, for three carbines were roaring now, and bullets came squalling down toward him.

"For troopers, those men are danged anxious to jerk carbine triggers!" Billy

growled as his horse crashed into a thick stand of cedars.

The scout plunged out of the saddle, snaking the Spencer from the scabbard as he dismounted. The three carbines were silent now, but Billy heard the horses coming on at a hard clip. Then he saw them through a brief opening, and shock hit him so hard his jaw sagged.

There were three riders, dressed in the easily distinguishable uniforms of cavalrymen. But those men were not cavalrymen. They were Bart Wilk, Walt Noolin and Ed Moody, and the army carbines in their hands were at ready as they roared towards the thicket where Billy Bates crouched, staring at them.

Then came sudden understanding, and Billy's amazement was gone as quickly as it had come. He flipped the Spencer up, lined the sights, and let the rifle's deep roar crash out along the canyon. Bart Wilk's campaign hat flew off and the big man cruelly curbed his mount until it squatted on its haunches, then slid off the saddle and lunged into cover, black beard and hair flying.

"Take cover, boys!" Wilk's voice boomed out.

The advice was scarcely necessary. Walt Noolin and Ed Moody had swung their mounts and were spurring into a thicket, hipped around in saddles and pumping carbine slugs into the cover that hid Billy Bates.

Billy grimaced a bit when a bullet seared the tip of his right shoulder. Then the Spencer boomed again, and skinny Walt Noolin's campaign hat flew off. But that had not been a warning shot. The huge leaden slug that knocked Walt Noolin's hat off had hit him first in the cheek, ranging upwards and out through the top of his skull.

"Bart, that yeller-eyed hellion got Walt!" Ed Moody cried out.

Ed Moody's voice was almost drowned in the double roar of rifles. Bart Wilk, figuring he had Billy located, sent a slug whamming into the brush just as Billy, locating Ed Moody's hiding place by the sound of his voice, let go a chance shot.

Wilk's slug went through Billy's buckskin shirt along the left side, burning like raw flame as it ripped his skin. Billy sat down hard, grunting from shock. But his tawny eyes quickly hunted the Spencer sights, for his shot had hit Ed Moody in the face, judging from the blood that was spewing through Moody's clawing hands as he jumped to his feet and staggered out into the open.

Seeing that Ed Moody was out of the fight for a few moments, at least, Billy swung the muzzle of the Spencer and was lining the sights on the spot where he believed Bart Wilk to be hiding, when a slug from Wilk's carbine hit the Spencer barrel.

Billy felt as if a horse had kicked him on the side of the head, where the Spencer stock slammed cheek and jaw. He went over backwards, lights pinwheeling before his glazed eyes.

"I heard that bullet hit him, Ed!" Wilk was whooping. "Quit bellerin' about a skinned face, and pull yore pistols. We've got to make sure that young devil is done for!"

Billy pushed against the ground with his hands. Booted feet were slogging out there in the little clearing, and suddenly Billy realized that the two men were getting dangerously close.

Billy groped for the butt of his Dragoon Colt, got the gun out, and came to his feet. He lurched heavily, crashing through the brushes and out into the open.

"Nail him!" Wilk's voice roared, and Billy Bates was suddenly spilling down to the ground again, thrown off his feet by the impact of a slug ripping through his left thigh.

THE SHOCK of the bullet was like a dash of cold water in Billy's face. His reeling brain cleared suddenly, and the Dragoon bucked and roared as his sinewy hand regained strength.

Bart Wilk was less than a dozen strides away, coming at full tilt, pistols slanting down for a sure-thing shot. Billy saw that much in the split-second it took him to tilt his Dragoon up and flip the big hammer in two rapid shots.

Wilk stopped as if he had straddled a rail fence. His twin pistols blasted, but their muzzles had jerked up and the balls passed a foot above Billy's head. A red torrent of blood spilled out of Wilk's mouth, and suddenly he was shuddering and trembling and settling earthward in the slow, stricken way Billy had seen bison go down after being shot.

Billy was looking only indirectly at Bart Wilk when the big man sank down, still gagging blood. Billy's eyes were on Ed Moody, who stood there blinking dazedly, the big Walker .44s hanging limply at his sides. Moody's nose and upper lips were mangled, spilling blood over the whole front of his uniform.

"Drop your guns, Moody!" Billy's voice rang out.

Moody jerked a bloody sleeve across his eyes, trying to focus his gaze. Billy launched himself forward in a long dive, and upset him. The scout swarmed over the howling tough, wrenched the Walker pistols from his hands.

"My slug tore your nose and upper lip off, but otherwise you're not hurt," Billy growled. "About all I can do, looks like, is cut your cussed throat. Or maybe I ought to bash in your skull, the way you bashed in Sam Vernon's skull this mornin'!"

"I didn't touch Vernon or either one of them others, Bates," Ed Moody groaned. "Me and Bart and Walt all come down to Sam's camp, last night. Sam Vernon and his bunch was gettin' set to move in on the Drake caravan for a killin' with their whisky and crooked games. Bart wanted a cut of what they took, and Sam Vernon didn't want to pony up."

He wiped blood from his face and continued. "We all set around drinkin' and jawin' until near midnight, but Vernon held out, refusin' to cut Bart Wilk in on the cleanin' he meant to give the Drake bunch. We all got drunk, and Sam Vernon threatened to tip old Garvey Drake off about the Injuns over in Roarin' Springs unless Bart toed the mark."

"So you and Wilk and Noolin sneaked back to Vernon's camp early this mornin', and murdered the whole bunch!" Billy snorted.

"We sneaked back, aimin' to steal Sam Vernon's cash-box and set his wagons on fire," Moody panted. "Vernon and his bunch heard us ransackin' the wagons, and we had to jump 'em. I was huntin' Vernon's cash-box, and didn't take no part in the fight."

"You're a poor liar, Moody!" Billy said coldly. "Sam Vernon and his bunch were murdered in their beds. The three of you plotted the murder and robbery for days, and stole ponies from Squaw Killer's camp to use durin' the raid. You three wanted those Sioux out of Roaring Canyon, and left sign that'll have that bone-headed Rod Parker jumping on the Indians if I don't get to him and make him see the straight of things."

Billy got to his feet, yanking the cursing, blood-smeared killer with him.

"Another thing that proves you fellas planned this thing out carefully, Moody, is the fact you three skittered over here and got into these uniforms," the scout said grimly. "You all meant to streak off to the rimrocks along Roaring Canyon, back yonder, let the Indians see you in the cavalry uniforms, then cold-bloodly shoot down several of those Sioux. That way, the Sioux would have come huntin' Rod Parker and his troops about the time Parker went huntin' the Indians. There'd have been a terrible fight when the aroused Indians and Parker's troops met."

ED MOODY glared, wiped blood from his face again.

"All right, Bates!" he said. "Sure, me and Walt Noolin and Bart Wilk jumped that double-crossin' Sam Vernon and his outfit. And we set the stage for a fight between that struttin' Parker squirt and the Injuns."

A crafty look crossed his face. "There's better than twenty thousand dollars, hard cash, up yonder where me and Bart and Walt changed into these uniforms we swiped off an outfit that was down here, last year. Turn me loose, keep yore mouth shut about all this, and every cent of that money up yonder is yores!"

"We'll go get the money, right now," Billy said slowly.

"Then you'll do it?" Moody cried. "You'll turn me loose, and keep yore lip buttoned about what you know?"

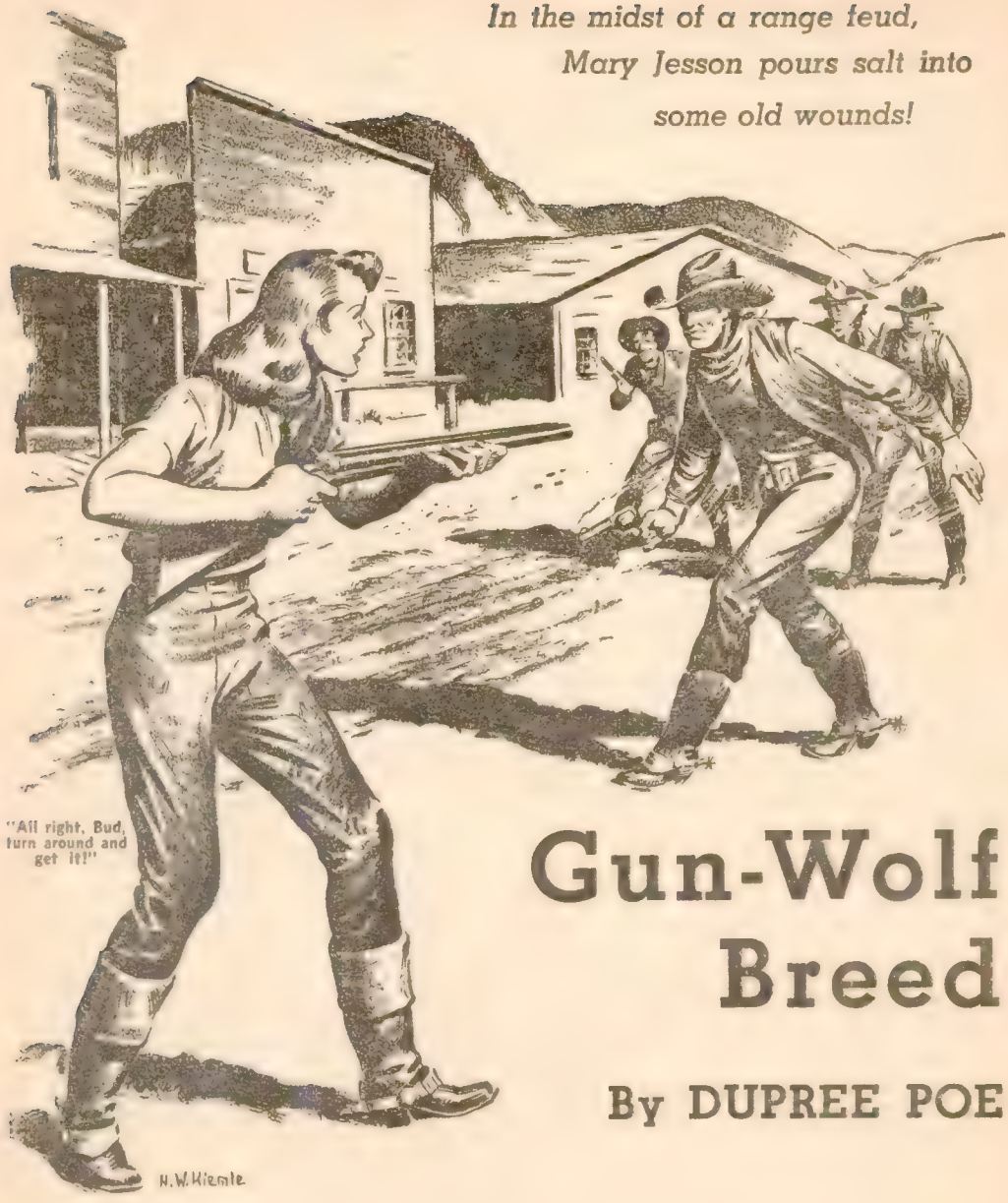
"We'll get the money—because it's stolen money for the authorities to handle," Billy said flatly. "You're goin' to Captain Parker with me, Moody. You'll tell him the truth!"

"I'll tell nothin'!" Moody grated. "Think I'm fool enough to talk my own neck into a noose?"

"You already have, bucko!" a hard voice said, and Billy Bates blinked at big Sergeant Luke Hoyt, who stepped out of a thicket, carbine in his hands.

(Concluded on page 79)

In the midst of a range feud, Mary Jesson pours salt into some old wounds!



Gun-Wolf Breed

By DUPREE POE

BUD WALKER rode into Cody and dismounted. Everything along the sandy street looked the same as it had before he left home five years before, but he sensed the undercurrent of tension that hung in his wake.

He paid no attention to men who watched his progress along the boardwalks. He moved with the easy, measured stride of a man of confidence and decision. His thin lips tightened slightly, and his blue eyes chilled. His father would not be here to greet him, because old Bob Walker was dead!

Pushing through the batwings of the Silver Saloon, Bud saw four men turn

away from the long bar to stare at him. Three of those men wore lawmen's badges, and he knew them all. Bud's lean hardness, the slight slump of weariness to his slender shoulders, the guns in their battered holsters had a telling effect on those unsmiling men who watched him.

Sheriff Gar Zaner's moon-shaped face flushed crimson. Seth Jesson, lanky and gaunt, gave him a steady look from unflinching black eyes under a low-pulled hatbrim. There was nothing cowardly about Jesson. He was a ruthless man, a little cold and utterly unfeeling. He was like Bud Walker's dad had been.

Kent Tolson and Pete Bozeman, the two deputy sheriffs, glanced at each other. Pete nodded to the lanky man beside him.

In a tone loud enough to carry to Bud Walker, the short little man with the badge said. "So, that's the slick-eared hairpin who's been gone from home for five years and built hisself up a gun-slick rep that's supposed to scare the local boys silly! You feel scared of him, Kent?"

The lanky deputy grinned like a wolf, exposing crooked, fang-like teeth. "If a man's just plumb bad, he'll show it soon enough. Then, we'll know whether we're scared of him." He looked hard at Bud Walker.

FIGHTING talk was nothing new to Bud Walker. He ignored it now and took his stand at the bar. Sheriff Gar Zaner moved up beside him.

"Yore dad took the law into his own hands and killed Dan Jesson," he said softly. "Seth Jesson shot him dead on the spot, fair and square. So, if yuh've come to pick a bone, yuh'd better do it the legal way. There's law in this here county, Bud Walker!"

Bud Walker wanted to laugh in the fat man's face. If there was anything legal or just about a law and a court controlled by Seth Jesson, he would like to know about it. He did not reply. The barman placed bottle and glass before him, and Bud poured his own and gulped it down. Now, he faced the lawman.

"A heck of a law you've turned out to be, Gar Zaner," he said in a hard, flat tone of defiance. "I hear Dad bet the HAT outfit against Jesson's Bar Four, and Dan Jesson done his crooked dealing and got caught at it. Dad killed him when Dan went for his gun, but Seth Jesson and the Law was there to kill my dad on the spot. I reckon that's all I've got to say to you."

The sheriff's fat face flamed crimson. Bud watched the other two lawmen and the man who had killed his dad. The two deputies stiffened. Seth Jesson dropped a hand to gun butt.

Bud carefully placed his whisky glass on the bar and stepped away from it. All his pent-up fury blazed in his blue eyes. The hardness was there, the passionate longing to put lead in those men who had slain his dad. He realized that they saw it there, for he could not conceal it.

"Easy, Seth!" warned Pete Bozeman, speaking to the cowman who had gone into a partial crouch, hand ready to pull his gun. "He aims to kill all of us. We ain't no match for a flip-gun expert who's followed the powder-smoke trail in all the range wars for the past five years. He'd drop all of us, like piling cordwood in a rick. We ain't no match for a killer with his speed!"

Seth Jesson swayed forward. His long neck stretched out like a rattler's about to strike. Then all the steel poured out of him. He leaned back against the bar, sober and calm.

"Yuh almost done me the way yore dad done my boy," he said levelly. "Yuh started fightin' talk to rile me to the shootin' point. In another minute, yuh'd have filled me full of lead and killed these lawmen. I danged nigh went for it!"

Bud Walker said, "Thunderation, Jesson, ain't yuh got no nerve?"

Jesson flinched. His black eyes became hard. For a moment, it looked as if he intended to go into action. Bud waited patiently, his eyes grim with desire to kill the man. But the cowman fought down his anger.

"My boy dealt the cards fair that night," Jesson said. "Me'n yore dad had decided to end our feud by bettin' our ranches on a hand of poker. The winner was to take all, the loser to leave the country. This range had become too blamed small for both of us. Yore dad lost the hand, then rared up on his hind legs and began sayin' it was a crooked deal and cussin' my boy. Old Bob dug out his gun, shot

my boy through the head. Then, I killed yore dad. That's how it happened!"

Seth Jesson stood with face flushed crimson, but he spoke honestly. Bud Walker reckoned the cowman was telling the truth, all right, because he knew Bob Walker might have done a thing like that. But that did not settle up the blood score. A Walker had to stick to another Walker.

"Yuh're a liar!" Bud said evenly. "My dad done no such a thing!"

A deputy held Jesson in a strong grip, keeping him steady. Jesson stiffened, fighting down his wrath. He spoke in the tone of a man crazed with fury.

"Be out of town by sundown, Bud Walker—else, I'll kill yuh!"

"Make it in the street at four o'clock," Bud challenged. "I'll be there."

Jesson nodded stiffly. "Yuh'll die for what yuh've said and done."

He turned toward the batwings, snarling out an oath. Bud knew that there went an old wolf as tough as saddle leather. Jesson wouldn't back down.

Pete Bozeman said softly, "Better think about leavin' town before four o'clock, Walker. A man like you could get killed mighty easy—with no questions asked later. Maybe even before four o'clock, if folks figured yuh intended to stay and kill Seth Jesson."

Bud said harshly, "Maybe you'd like a hand, Bozeman?"

The deputy shook his head. "Not me, mister. I was just tellin' how folks might think around here. A lot of them are mighty tired of the way the Walkers have high-handed things in the county. Most of them figure a Walker is branded with the wolf sign. Yuh won't find many friends left here."

"Yore dad was wrong," the sheriff cut in. "There were witnesses to that game. He lost his HAT outfit to young Jesson and started that gun rumpus, tryin' to welch on the deal he'd made."

"Yuh're a liar!" Bud declared hotly. "The whole pack of yuh are liars." He was ready for them, but they stood their ground and refused his challenge. He laughed harshly, for he realized they feared him. He wore the gunwolf brand. A killer. A gun-slick. "I need some fresh air!" he said.

He felt their eyes on his back when he headed for the batwings. One of them might put a bullet between his shoulder blades, but he would live long enough to whip around and wipe out that hand-picked batch of crooked lawmen. . . .

On the street later he heard a low, feminine voice call his name. "Bud Walker. Over here, Bud Walker." He looked around and saw Mary Jesson standing in the doorway of the Mercantile. He recognized her instantly.

HER lovely face was framed under a wealth of silky blond hair. A look of worry dulled the brightness of her blue eyes. He looked at her solemnly and memory washed back on him. He recalled that he and she had grown up together, spent many happy childhood days alone, before their fathers began feuding.

"You've growed some, Mary," he greeted her.

Her smile and dimples flashed, then shut off, and her face regained its troubled look. "So have you, Bud, and I'm afraid of you now. So is almost everybody else around here. A hired killer! A gun-swift! I've heard those things about you ever since you left home. You're a gunwolf, Bud, because it's in your heart to kill. The same as it was in your dad's—and in my dad's. I've prayer for Dad, Bud, and I've prayed for you—and I know those prayers ought to be answered somehow before there's more blood spilled in this senseless feud. What difference does it make who runs this basin, anyhow?"

"It makes a difference who owns the HAT outfit, and your dad has taken charge of it. I aim to have what belongs to me, Mary."

He did not speak harshly, for he felt a trace of hungry longing grip him. Maybe if he had not taken to the gun trail, he might have remained at home and watched Mary grow up to young womanhood. Perhaps he and she might have got married and saved their dads a lot of hellish fighting. It was too late now.

"If you would come down off your high-horse and try to make peace with dad, maybe things would turn out all right, Bud," she pleaded.

All the warmth froze in him. He remembered that date for four o'clock. "It'll be settled, proper," he declared, "before sundown."

She stiffened and her blue eyes flamed. There was a savage strain in the blood that pounded through her veins. She wore the brand of a gunwolf, too, and he saw it plainly in the glare she bent on him, for all the feminine softness washed out of her.

"If you kill my dad, I'll come for you with a shotgun," she threatened.

Now the fear in him beat down his cool nerve. He saw himself standing there in the center of the street, with old Seth Jesson sprawled dead in the dust. Saw himself, a gun-slinger of pride and reputation, faced by a determined slip of a girl with a shotgun and the strength of will to use it.

"Confound it, Mary, I can't fight no woman," he gasped.

She turned away from him toward two rangy men who stood near a passageway between two buildings. "You'd better be ready to fight one, if you kill my dad," she said, stepping into the alleyway.

Bud Walker followed her, pleading. "Now, look here, Mary . . . "

Something landed hard behind his left ear. Darkness swirled around him. His last conscious moment was filled with the voice of a frantic girl.

"Hurry up, boys, and pull his fangs!" she cried. "Hurry, before he wakes up and kills somebody."

Bud Walker regained consciousness at exactly three-thirty. He got to his feet and gingerly felt the knot behind his left ear. Dazed and puzzled, he adjusted his hat and took a hitch in his gunbelt. He worked the guns in their holsters and found they slid easily. He wondered why those men and that girl had not killed him. Then he stopped wondering and moved out to the street.

In the Owl Saloon, he had a drink and felt better but was more and more puzzled over that strange attack. At ten minutes to four o'clock, he went back to the street and took a longing look at his gelding tied at the rack. For the first time in his gunwolf career, he felt a strange fear tugging at his heart. He mentally visualized Mary's lovely face and remembered her threat to use a shotgun on him.

He stepped out to the hitch-rack and started to untie his horse. His mind was made up. He couldn't fight a woman—especially Mary Jesson!

The sheriff, his two deputies and Seth Jesson came from another saloon and saw him there beside his gelding. Pete Bozeman bellowed at him in an insulting tone, taunting him ruthlessly.

"You ridin' some place, c o w b o y? Plumb scared to stay and face a poor old man in a stand-up fight? Dadburn me, we thought yuh was a gunman!"

"Yellow!" Kent Tolson flung at him. "Just plain yellow!"

Old Seth Jesson chipped in saying: "Yuh've still got five minutes to live, Bud Walker, before I shoot yuh down."

Bud Walker knew he was in a trap. These four curly-wolves intended to gang up on him. He turned away from his horse, resolved to stay and give all of them a big bait of gun-smoke sickness. Then he saw Mary Jesson come from the Mercantile with a double-barreled shotgun, and his blood turned to water.

Prideful, he faced his enemies. He would kill all of them, then take the double load of buckshot from Mary's gun. A man had to die sometime!

SETH JESSON stepped into the street, ramrod stiff and ready to die if need be. The lawmen went into action on the moment, digging for their cutters. Bud's guns came up from holsters, thundering. He planted three solid shots over the hearts of those lawmen, knowing he could not miss at that distance. But they did not go down. They just stood in their tracks, blazing away at him.

The old man was slow, mighty slow and stiff-armed. Bud Walker sent a bullet straight toward Seth Jesson's heart. The oldster went back, cussing madly, but he did not fall. Panic took hold of Bud Walker. He felt bullets stinging his flesh and he wondered how he managed to remain on his own feet. Then, behind him, a girl's voice sounded.

"All right, Bud, turn around and get it."

He looked into the bores of that double-barreled shotgun. Before he could protest that he had killed nobody yet, those twin muzzles exploded smoke and fire. Thunder rolled up and down the street. Bud Walker felt a searing pain when something pounded hard against his

stomach. He buckled at the middle and went into the dust, knocked breathless. Mary reloaded and cut down on her father. Seth Jesson yelped like a dog with its tail in a knot.

Mary shoved fresh loads into her gun, said calmly: "The feud is ended, gents, because I've just loaded up with buckshot—not rock salt!"

Seth Jesson demanded: "What'n tarnation is the meanin' of all this, gal?"

Mary said sweetly: "I've always prayed that Bud Walker would come home some day and that the feud would end forever. Now it's ended, because I'll certainly turn this gun on any man who tries to start it again."

She glared at them, but there were no takers. They believed her.

Bud examined his guns and found the cartridges loaded with rock salt. He now knew why none of his shots had killed a man. Old Seth Jesson and those three lawmen looked a lot smarter right now, too.

"I fixed your guns while you were asleep in the alley," Mary told Bud Walker. "But there was no harm could come to you. I saw to that."

"I reckon yuh fixed mine, too, while yuh was pretendin' t clean 'em for me and the boys up at the house," Seth Jesson snorted.

"Yes, Dad, I fixed everybody's guns," Mary replied simply. "I saw no need for more blood spilling in this useless feud!"

"A fine note, this is," Jesson roared. "Mary, don't yuh know Bud Walker won't never forget I shot his dad? Bud'll be gunnin' for me always now."

Bud Walker shook his head and said: "Nope, not me, Seth. You won't last *always*. Some day, you'll die of old age and leave this range to Mary and me." He grinned at the girl and asked: "You think we can run it, honey—without feuding with each other?"

"That was part of my prayers!" she said, nodding eagerly. "I know we can, Bud."

BUCKSKIN AND IRON

(Concluded from page 74)

"Man, am I glad to see you!" Billy said. "I'm crippled up some, and was sure beginnin' to wonder how I could get this murderin' devil back to you and Captain Parker."

"The captain wanted you followed, and gave me the job, Billy," the sergeant grinned. "Maybe he did you a favor, at that. Anyhow, I got here in time to hear this Moody devil talk."

"Watch him, while I see about these wounds of mine, Sergeant," Billy said. "I want to get to Rod Parker and see that he lets Squaw Killer and those other Sioux strictly alone. Then I'd better fan the breeze back north, or Bill Cody will accuse me of takin' time out to go fishin'!"

"Man, the way you're leakin' blood, you'll not set a saddle for some time!" the sergeant said gruffly.

"Tie Moody to his saddle, then help me bind up these hurts, if you will," Billy grinned faintly. "But ten will get you twenty, Sergeant, that I'm headed north on that bay of mine before noon mess call."

"And I'd be losin' my ten if I bet it!" the sergeant said drily. "You buckskin men are all alike—buckskin on the outside, iron on the inside!"

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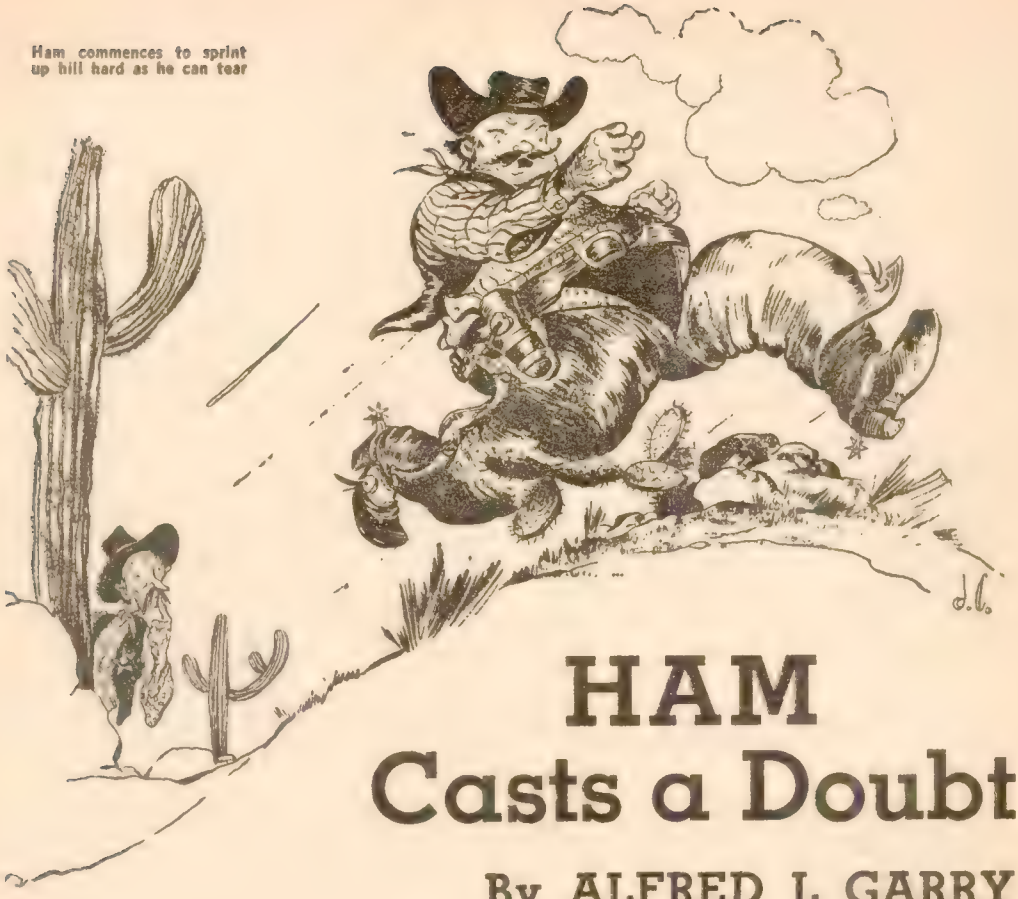

Ham commences to sprint up hill hard as he can tear

HAM Casts a Doubt

By ALFRED L. GARRY

NOW, I ain't no Paul Fry. But the way my deputy, Ham, is acting has me curious as a she antelope. There was a locoed feller in the Bible that commenced to eat grass. My pardner's took to doing something worse. He's eating stones!

Yes, sir, Ham rides out to the edge of town, unmounts, and looking all around furtive as a feller about to cache a sack of gold, he quick pops a handful of pebbles into his mouth. But that ain't all!

Chewing on them rocks, Ham commences to sprint up hill hard as he can tear. His arms pump at his sides like locomotive pistons, his fat face flushes, then turns bandanna red as the sweat pours down his forehead like a sheety waterfall. At the top of the hill, Ham's tongue is hanging out and he's panting like a spent hound.

Does he flop down on the grass and take a blow? Not on your tintype! Ham, still puffing like a bronc with the heaves, climbs up on a boulder, shoves his hand inside his shirt like Napoleon scratching his cooties, and glares at the tumbleweed and sagebrush with a fierce frown.

Sheriff Egg discovers that Deputy Ham is one right salty lawyer when Sweetgrass County fries an omelet of trouble!

"Friends, Romans, and feller citizens," he commences to orate, the pebbles in his mouth mushing up the words, "when in the course of human nature it becomes necessary for me to borrow yore ears—"

And so he runs off at the mouth, all about life, liberty, and chasing after happiness. Sometimes he raises his trigger finger high in the air, shaking it in circles like a Fourth of July Roman candle. Other times, he bangs his fist in his palm, like a blacksmith forging a point. Ham sticks out his bull neck, thrusts his jaw forward, and shouts furious about malefactories of great wealth. Or again, after making a wisecrack, he'll smirk like a monkey, stick his thumbs in his vest armholes, and prance back and forth like a self-satisfied peacock.

"What'n'ell's going on?" I ask, getting up from behind the boulder I've Injuned up to.

"I object!" Ham thunders, shaking a furious finger at me. "The matter ain't no relation, is unmaterial, and way off the point!"

"Yuh're shore off yore point!" I crack. "Meaning yore pinhead!"

"Aw, Egg," Ham grins good-natured. "Don't yuh go throwin' cold water on a feller's ambition to improve himself. For twenty years as lawmen we been throwin' folks in the calaboose. What's it got us?"

"Gray hair," I admit.

"Gray for yuh. None for me." Ham mops his bald pate. "The powerful thinkin' I've done has wore the hair roots out from the inside. And sheriff-earned dollars in our poke are just as rare as hairs on my head! Jailin' people is no way to get rich. It's pryin' fellers out of jail that gold-lines the pockets of lawyers!"

HAM pauses dramatic, throws out his chest, and announces, "Egg, yuh are lookin' at a future Blackstone. A little on the crooked side, mind yuh. Why, with you as sheriff throwing hairpins in jail, and me as a lawyer argufyin' them out, we'll be playin' both ends toward the middle. As soon as I finish my correspondence school law lessons, we're as good as in the deep clover."

"Them lessons tell yuh to go out an' eat rocks?" I want to know, giving Ham the jaundice eye.

"Yep!" Ham replies. "A great old time Greek orator, named Dem-mothy-knees, learned how that way. He put rocks in his mouth, ran up hill, just like me, and then spieled away at the top to build his wind and bellowing power."

"Well—"

I commence but don't finish. From the town below us, comes two quick-driven pistol shots, the rumbling roar of a shotgun. Startled silence. Then the yammering of an outraged, excited crowd.

"We'd better hustle back!" I yelp, sprinting for my bronc. "One of our citizens has likely bit the dust an' plumb lost his bellowing power!"

"Sawed-off!" Ham grunts. "That'd be that darned sheepherder!"

A knot of grim-faced people are standing around the sprawled body of Carl Pringle. We push through the crowd. Poor old Carl, he's got a buckshot window blowed in him. Gently, Ham kneels down and raises his grief-stricken son, Dale, from beside his father's body.

"There's nothin' we can do, son," Ham says kindly. "Yore father got in the first two shots. A clear case of self-defense!"

"Self-defense, my foot!" Dale grits between clenched teeth. "Pete Porcello badgered Dad into drawing. He knew his eyes were bad. Let Dad get off two wild shots before blasting him with his shotgun!"

Dale then adds in a deadly level monotone, "Sheriff, I'm going to kill that cowardly sheepman! If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm going to make Pete Porcello suffer for this!"

"I wouldn't, Dale," I say kindly. "Porcello paid cash money for his range rights. Don't chouse him. The law's on his side—now."

"As much as we hate it," Ham adds softly, showing me a pair of old-fashioned specs he's palmed from the dust.

"Come, Dale, you'd better come home with us," Madge Humbert says sympathetically, taking Dale's arm.

The spirited girl's eyes flash disdainfully at me an' Ham, as she adds, "These lawmen also said Porcello was within his rights when he murdered my father! You'll get no help from them as long as Porcello skirts the edge of the law. But, Dale, you're in no condition to brace the murderer now. Besides, shooting would be too easy a death for the skunk!"

An ominous mutter, threatening like distant thunder, rumbles through the knot of bleak-eyed cowmen standing around the tarp-covered body of one of their kind. Me an' Ham are sitting on a powder keg.

"Let's go over and brace Porcello," I say to Ham.

We find Porcello, his double barreled sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm, drinking alone at Freddie's bar. The cowmen, grouped at the far end, have cut him cold. He's a small, deadly sidewinder, dark as an Injun, but claiming to be a gypsy.

Out of nowhere, Porcello appears in Sweetgrass County about two years back. He cash-buys the Crooked Arrow and Lame Horse Creek spreads, along with their grazing rights on the range. When Porcello brings in sheep, a delegation headed by Madge Humbert's father calls upon him.

"We've got a fair proposition to offer you, Porcello," Humbert says. "Sheep spoil the range and water for horses and cattle. We don't want that. So we've come peaceful to buy you out. Us ranchers will club together, pay you cash for your spreads and full market price for your sheep."

"That's mighty fair," Ham oars in, because we've come along just in case of fireworks.

Porcello, reminding me of a deadly sidewinder, runs his muddy eye over the ranchers insolently.

"You gents come uninvited," he snarls. "You are trespassing! Get the blazes off my land!"

At the same time he thumbs back the ears of his sawed-off shotgun, which he packs instead of cutters.

"Look here, now—" Ham commences to protest.

"You too, with yore tin star! Git!"

Porcello's eyes commence to glint red, like a blood-hungry ferret's. He jabs the shotgun into Ham's midsection.

"Git!"

"Come on, Ham," old man Humbert says in his calm, mild voice. "There's other ways to handle this situation."

"Mark that, Sheriff!" Porcello mutters, swinging his gun on the old rancher. "You heard him! The man has threatened me!"

Three days later, Porcello slouches insolently into our office with one of his Mexican sheepherders. He tosses a cutter on our desk.

"Humbert's gun, Sheriff," he says. "Check it. Two exploded ca'tridges. Yuh'll find his body up on Spike Mountain divide. He shot first. Ask Mendoze, here. He saw it. Yuh'd better beat the buzzards to the carcass!" he finishes callously.

Porcello has "Skinflint" Taggart, the crooked lawyer from Buckstrap, with him at the inquest. We ain't able to shake the story Porcello and his herder, Mendoze, tell. Skinflint Taggart makes so many objections when me an' Ham try to tell how the sign up there reads mighty suspiciously like Humbert was blasted from ambush, that all the jury can do is free Porcello. Self-defense. He swaggers to the door, turns, and with maddening impudence, hawks and spits on the floor at our feet.

"That hairpin's buildin' himself a unmourned funeral!" Ham grunts under his breath. "I'd shore like to oblige!"

NOW, as we approach Porcello in Freddie's, he puts down his drink, eyeing us warily. With tantalizing insolence, he cocks first one, and then the other barrel of his sawed-off.

"There'll be no need of an inquest this time, Sheriff!" he snarls. "The whole town saw old man Pringle shoot first!"

"After yuh'd knocked the spectacles off his face!" Ham accuses. "Yuh knew Pringle couldn't see past his nose without 'em!"

"I don't ask a feller who's shootin' at me how far he can see!" Porcello grits with a shrug. "Try to pin anythin' on me, an' my lawyer'll make a monkey out a yuh!"

Ham slowly crowds closer to Porcello, until the muzzle of the sawed-off is right against his top vest botton. The two men glare at each other, unyielding, like a wolverine and grizzly bear disputing a narrow trail.

Ham, his mouth in a grim straight line, leans forward. Porcello's shotgun dents his corporation like a finger poked in a pan of raising bread dough. Ham's half-slitted eyes are boring into Porcello, calling his bluff, daring the sheepman to crook his finger on the trigger.

The room is so breathless silent that the ticking of the clock over the bar sounds like a death watch. Twenty men are poised on the balls of their feet, hands taloned over their walnuts, ready to pour their eager lead into the sheepman the moment his trigger finger commences to creep.

Porcello has backed himself square behind the eight ball. His eyes waver to me.

That's where he makes his big mistake. Ham's left arm brushes the gun muzzle aside as his right fist lashes out with the blurring speed of a heron spiking a minnow. His rage-driven knuckles spat hollowly on Porcello's leering mouth, all but ripping his head off.

Ham wrenches the shotgun from the startled sheepman's grasp. Before the gypsy can recover, Ham belts him a good lick alongside the head with the stock. Porcello caves, hits the brass rail, half rolls, and buries his face in the sawdust.

He rolls over, sits up, rocking like a ticked ten-pin. Bewilderedly, Porcello puts a thumb and forefinger into his mashed mouth and pulls out a loose tooth.

Ham reaches down, jerks Porcello to his feet by a handful of vest, and shakes him like a hound shakes a rabbit.

"Judge Mirander, Judge Mirander," Ham bellows, calling for the justice of our peace.

"Comin' front an' center," the judge answers, starting, and then going back for his half finished beer. "What's the charges, Sheriff?"

"Violating Sweetgrass City Ordinance No. 984," Ham declares, making the whole thing up in his head. "Yuh know, Judge, the stat-toot about outlaws carrying a loaded an' cocked scatter-gun in a public buildin'!"

"Shore, shore, Porcello's guilty as Judas!" Judge Mirander frowns. "Mighty danged serious offense. Someone might have got hurt. Porcello, you are hereby, an' to wit, fined ten dollars for violating Ordinance No.— Say, Ham," the judge scratches his head, "what was that number?"

"Nine, eighty-four," Ham lies faster than a hoss can trot. "Pay up, Porcello!"

Muttering curses, Porcello hands the judge the ten bucks, not realizing Ham's pulled a shindy on him.

As he starts for the door, Ham bellows sharply, "Porcello!"

When the still punch-drunk sheepman turns, Ham goes on, "Yuh forgot somethin'. If yuh got a mind to spit at this court the way yuh did at Carl Humbert's inquest, Porcello, that missin' tooth'll make it mighty easy!"

FREDDIE, the barkeeper, cocks a eyebrow at the rage-quivering batwing doors behind the sheepman's cursing exit, and drawls to my pardner, "Ham, I wouldn't sit around home in the evenin' without drawin' the blinds. That gypsy's got you number one man on his list!"

Ham pays good heed to Freddie's advice while he stays home nights to puzzle out the law stuff in that correspondence course he's taking. Soon my pardner can shore talk mighty fancy legal lingo, all about 2-wits, hay-by-the-corpses, and other Judas-prune-juice.

One night while Ham is jury pleading to the kitchen chairs, there's a sharp pistol butt rap on the front door. Standing to one side, we jerk in open. Sheriff Rawson, of neighboring Buckstrap County, stands blinking in the lamplight.

"What's on yore mind, Rawson?" I say not too cordial, knowing it won't be good coming from him.

"I want yuh to side me while I pick up Dale Pringle," Rawson says. "Murder."

"Who?"

"Porcello."

"I'll be—"

"So was I when I seen how he did it." Rawson shakes his head wearily. "Regular Apache job, the boy did. The sheepman musta suffered like a dog before he cashed in."

"Oh!" Ham says, his legal mind sniffing for a loophole already. "Then yuh got no witnesses?"

"No need," Rawson replies. "It's all wrote out in the sand, ready for anyone who can halfway read sign to see. Everyone knows Dale has a weighted shoe on the right forefoot of that quarter hoss he rides. I ain't disturbed nothing. Didn't have a shovel to bury what's left of the gypsy. After we've jailed Dale, I'll take yuh over the sign."

We ride out to the Sleeping P spread, and find young Dale in his office off the living room working on his accounts.

DALE asks, "What's up?" surprised at having three lawmen visit him so late in the night.

"Where's yore sorrel quarter hoss, Dale?" Rawson asks.

"Why, I pulled her shoes and turned her out on the range two weeks ago." Dale answers, still mystified. "Someone stolen her?"

"No, Dale," I say, nodding toward Rawson. "His nibs says a hairpin riding a sorrel with a weighted shoe savaged Porcello to death. I don't know the details. But Rawson has a warrant for yore arrest. Yuh'd better come with us peaceful."

"Just a minute," Ham interrupts.

With a great show of deliberation, Ham unbelts his cutters, lays them on the table, and unpinning his law-badge, places it on top of the heap.

"Egg," he turns to me woodenly, "I hereby resign as yore deputy!"

Ham then strides over in front of Dale. Thumping his chest, he goes on, "Son, outside of Skinflint Taggart, Porcello's lawyer, there ain't legal council to be had in these parts. But I've been studyin' law, and hereby declare myself yore attorney. Son, I'm sidin' yuh!"

"Thanks, Ham," Dale says, like a drowning man clutching at a straw.

"Let's see that warrant," Ham demands, jerking it out of Rawson's hand. "I'm lookin' for loopholes an' weasel words."

Ham reads the warrant, his lips moving and his stubby trigger finger pausing on each word. His perplexed frown deepens. He shakes his head several times, as though the gears in his noggin ain't meshing right.

"Rawson," Ham questions thoughtfully, "you write out this here warrant?"

"Nope," Rawson crawfishes, "it was did for me."

"Who?"

"Skinflint Taggart has took a great interest in the case."

"Porcello's lawyer!" Ham exclaims. "That's why there ain't no loopholes in this warrant. Somethin's fishy!"

Ham frowns deep for a minute, then turns to Dale and lays a fatherly arm on his shoulder, saying, "Yuh'd better go peaceful, son. Me an' Egg'll go over the evidence an 'try to raise yore bail."

Me an' Ham have seen some mighty stomach-unsettling deaths in our days. But from the sign, Porcello was done away in a manner that'd make an Apache proud. I wouldn't tell these details in polite company. But it's necessary. Because it shows why, even though Porcello was a sheepman, the whole countryside turns against Dale.

It's wrote out in sign, so plain that even a tenderfoot can read it running. We see where Dale, on his weighted-shoe hoss, waits behind a boulder at the edge of the Big Alkali Sink for Porcello to come by in his buckboard. A flipped loop jerks the sheepherder off his buggy. He's dragged across the boulders and rubble until his clothes are about shredded off.

From time to time, Porcello must have passed out. The killer unmounts and squats on his heels like an Injun waiting for him to come to again. All the time, the killer is dragging the suffering sheepman toward the center of the Big Sink. This sink ain't as large or as famous as Death Valley. But it's just as hot, and has claimed the lives of as many people as Death Valley in proportion to its size.

The rider, with his man in tow, sets a fast pace as he heads further into the hellishly hot glaring sink. More and more often, Porcello wavers, staggers, and falls. The heartless rider drags him on. Even my stomach crawls as I see the dried patches of human hide and blood on the ground.

Right in the middle of this blasting hot hell, Dale cruelly knifes the remaining clothes off Porcello, flips off his rope, and spurs away, leaving the sheepman to perish. The blazing sun, and one freezing cold night is all it takes. Buzzards, dessert rats, and insects do their work fast. Porcello's skeleton is picked clean, the new bones glaring white on the dirty gray of the alkali.

Then Ham does the darnedest thing. He unrolls his slicker, takes out a small sack of flour and a canteen of water.

"What the heck, Ham?" Rawson protests with a shudder, "My appetite's curdled. After seein' this, I couldn't eat a mouthful without gaggin'!"

"We ain't eatin'!" Ham replies.

Ham mixes a stiff flour and water batter, and pours the mixture into the hoofprint made by the weighted shoe of Dale's bronc.

"We'll just let the sun bake us a cast of that shoe print," Ham explains. "It looks a mite queer to me."

"How?" Rawson wants to know. "Dale's the only man in these parts that had a shoe like that made. I've checked the blacksmiths."

"Shore, shore," Ham says. "Come over here, you two."

Ham squats on his heels, studying Porcello's scattered bones. Gingerly, he rolls the skull over with a rock flake, reluctant to touch it.

"Egg," he orders, "study that skull."

"Heck, Ham, there's no doubt it's Porcello's. Along the trail we found his clothes. Rawson picked up his tally book right here!" Then I play my best card. "Look, Ham, that skull has a missing front tooth! The one you knocked out after Porcello blasted down Dale's father!"

"Egg, button yore darned lip!" Ham whispers. "An' study that skull like I told yuh!

"Here, Rawson," he calls. "So there'll be no doubt about the evidence, I want you an' Egg to pencil yore initials on this here skull."

After we've marked the skull, Ham carefully rolls it in his slicker and ties it behind his saddle. Then he pries out the hardened dough cast he's made of the weighted shoe print. He wraps it in his bandanna and puts it in his saddle pocket, careful, like it's a hen's egg.

WELL, sir, right from the beginning of the trial, I wouldn't give you a plugged nickel for Dale's neck. From the evidence, he ain't got a Chinaman's chance. Skinflint Taggart skillfully lawknots a plumb legal noose. He brings out that Dale has publicly sworn to make Porcello suffer for the death of his father. He puts our Sweetgrass horseshoer, Ollie Newton, on the stand and shows him a weighted horseshoe that was found on Dale's place. Newton admits it's the one he made for Dale's sorrel. Twenty men of the posse swear in rapid succession that the hoss the murderer of Porcello rode had such a weighted shoe, and that Dale was the only man in the countryside who rode such a bronc. Taggart confidently rests his case.

Ham just sits glum, studying the floor, as the Buckstrap lawyer hammers home his incriminating evidence, point by point nailing the coffin lid on Dale. Once in a while, my pardner reaches over and sympathetically pats the hand of sorrowing Madge Humbert.

She is proudly sitting beside Dale, sticking to him at a time when even his best friends, appalled by the stark savagery of the method he used to murder Porcello, think him guilty.

When Ham's turn comes, I expect the lummox to commence spouting his newlearned mail order law like a Yellowstone geyser. Old Skinflint Taggart is rubbing his dry palms gleefully together. He's got the case sewed up tight. He's going to be able to rip any defense Ham can make into shreds.

Ham gets slowly to his feet, bows to Judge Adams, who was sent down from Butte to try the case. From the expression on the judge's face, it's clear he's braced himself for an assault on the character of the witnesses, and a heavy fusillade of highfalutin' bombast.

But Ham fools 'em completely. He walks slowly over to the jury box, serious, because Dale's life is in his hands. In a low, earnest tone, like one cowman talking to another, he commences to plead his case.

"I know every one of you fellers," he commences. "Yuh all got common hoss sense. Friends, that's what's needed now. Not law rigmarole. There's only one point of law I'm goin 'to harp on.

"Fellers," he levels earnestly, "when I get through, if yuh still think Dale is guilty *beyond a shadow of doubt,* hang him! But," Ham brings up his forefinger, pointing it at each juryman, "but, if any one of yuh hairpins have a morsel of doubt that the boy is guilty of this fiendish murder, yuh must free him!"

"I object!" Skinflint yammers to his feet. "Witnesses—"

"Shut up, yuh connivin' crook!" Ham barks, proving his correspondence law course ain't sunk in very deep.

"Proceed, Ham," Judge Adams orders, hiding a grin behind his hand. "But remember, you must show respect for the opposing council."

"Respect for that—" Ham hogties his tongue quick, and mumbles, "Shore, shore, Judge. I'll get to that rat later!"

Ham turns again to the jury, saying,

"Boys, here is where I cast my first doubt."

A titter goes around the courtroom as Ham reaches over into the jury box. He sets the brass spittoon out of the sand box. Grunting, Ham lifts the heavy box of sand to the lawyer's table. Slowly, my pardner smooths the sand in the box.

"Will Ollie Newton, our Sweetgrass blacksmith, please take the witness chair again," Ham requests, just like it says in his law studies.

When the blacksmith has taken his seat, Ham has him identify again the weighted hoss shoe he made for Dale. Ham then carefully makes a print of the shoe in the spittoon sand box.

"Now this is plaster of Paris," Ham explains, taking a small package and an empty tomato can from a paper bag. He mixes the plaster of Paris with some water from the pitcher on the table and pours it into the weighted hoss shoe print he's just made.

"Folks," he goes on, "at the place where we found the skeleton of the man Dale is accused of killing, I made a flour and water cast the same way of the imprint of the weighted shoe of the hoss twenty witnesses have sworn belonged to Dale. Here it is. I—"

"Objection!" Skinflint Taggart leaps to his feet. "How do we know he's not substituted evidence. What proof has he that the dough cast is not a fake!"

"That's right, Ham," the judge says. "We can't admit the dough cast of the hoofprint as evidence unless you can prove it was made as you say."

"I can tell if that dough cast has been tampered with," Rawson speaks up. "I seen a tumble-bug get caught in the dough. Let Ham go on. When he's finished we'll break up the dough cast. If there's a tumble-bug in it, it's on the level!"

"If there's not," Skinflint shouts, waving his finger at the judge, "it'll be evidence that Ham's tampering with legal evidence. I'll demand he be thrown off the case, and Dale hung right away!"

Ham picks the plaster of Paris cast, which had hardened quickly, out of the spittoon box sand. He hands it and the dough cast from the Big Sink, to Newton. As the honest old blacksmith looks at the casts, a perplexed frown gulches his brow.

"Well?" Ham prompts.

"I'll swear on a stack of Bibles I made the hoss shoe that made this cast," Newton says, holding up the plaster of Paris cast Ham's just made. "But," he goes on, "I'm just as certain that I never hammered out the shoe that made the print this dough cast was taken from!"

A murmer ripples over the crowd.

"Explain y o u r s e l f," Judge Adams orders.

"Well, you see, Judge," Newton says, "Dale's sorrel threw its right foot outside. That's why I welded the weight where I did. This weight," Ollie holds up the dough cast, "looks as though it was welded on the shoe by some ranch hand. Crude job. Not the job a mechanic would do."

"Then you're sure Dale's horse didn't make the tracks around the skeleton of Porcello!"

"I object!" Skinflint yelps. "You've forgotten about the tumble-bug that's got to be found before the evidence is admissible!"

YOU could have throwed and hogtied the silence in the courtroom as Judge Adams carefully commences to crumble Ham's dough cast. Ham leans forward, beads of sweat on his brow. Dale pales under his tan, breathing hard. Madge is biting her knuckles to keep from screaming, the tension is that great.

Bit by bit the judge slowly drops the crumbling particles to the table. The eyes of the taut jury follow every movement of his hands. Ham mops his brow as the judge's lean fingers commence to crush the final piece. A self-satisfied smirk seeps over Skinflint's lean hawk-nosed face. He's being dealt an ace!

"Ah!" Judge Adams e j a c u l a t e s, straightening up. "There's the bug! The evidence stands!"

Ham slumps in his chair, grinning at the crestfallen lawyer. The jury, shaking their heads at one another, lean back in their seats. Ham's got the thin edge of his wedge in. He's sewed a doubt!

Like a gambler about to take a big pot, Ham plays his trump. Quickly, before the courtroom has a chance to fully recover from their surprise, he places his slicker roll on the table. He unrolls it with a sudden dramatic jerk. The white

skull grins against the black slicker as a startled gasp goes up from the crowd.

"Sheriff Rawson, will yuh please take the stand," Ham says. "Now tell the court how yuh identified the skeleton in this case as Porcello's."

"No doubt about it!" Rawson states firmly. "The clothes we found was his. If that ain't enough, we found his tally book beside what was left of him."

"Any other identification that would cinch the matter?" Ham asks. "Think hard, man!"

"Why, that skull right there on the table proves it was Porcello beyond a doubt!" Rawson declares. "You should know that, Ham. You, yourself, knocked out that missing tooth after the gypsy blasted down Dale's dad!"

"So?" Ham purrs, his eyebrows doing a cat's back for the benefit of the jury. "Now, let's see. I swung on Porcello with my right fist. The tooth I knocked out was to the left of center. Look at this skull! The missing tooth is right of center!"

"I remember!" Ollie Newton blurts out. "I was there!"

A chorus of "Ah's" go up from the crowd.

The ramrod of the jury leaps to his feet, crying, "Heck, Judge, we might as well wind this thing up now. All us jurymen got a darned sight more than a reasonable doubt that Dale did the killing!"

"Highly irregular!" Judge Adams pronounces. But he's got a heap of hoss sense, because he goes on, "Dale Pringle, the charges against you are dismissed!"

"Hold yore hosses, Judge," Ham raises his hand for silence. "I want Dale Pringle hung!"

Silence hangs in that court room thicker than cigar smoke at a cattlemen's convention.

"What?" Judge Adams is flabbergasted. "Hung?"

"That's right," Ham declares. "But, first, I want Skinflint Taggart and them two sheepherders of Porcello's locked up. They're in this up to their necks!"

"I object!" Skinflint yelps, jumping to his feet.

He crosses the room and shakes a rage-quivering finger under Ham's nose.

"What are the charges?" he demands.

"Bruisin' a feller's knuckles with yore chin!" Ham demonstrates, neatly popping him on the jaw.

"Ham! Ham! Explain yourself!" Judge Adams raps like an excited woodpecker with his gavel.

Instead of explaining, Ham leaps across the room, grabs one of the sheepherders by the vest, shakes him, bellowing, "Where's Mendoze?"

The feller turns the color of overcreamed coffee, rolls his eyes, and commences to sidehill, "*Quien sabe, quien sabe,* he go, one, maybe two week. No come back."

"Rawson, close that gapin' fly-trap of yores an' lock these fellers up along with Taggart!" Ham commands.

In no time we have the three handcuffed, and Rawson marches them downstairs to the jail.

"Now," Ham turns to the crowd, leveling, "this won't work unless every one of us buttons our lips. I want yuh all to swear to secrecy. Raise yore right hands."

After he's sworn the whole crowd to keep their traps closed, Ham repeats, "Now, I want Dale hung!"

"No! Ham!" Madge Humbert cries.

"Gosh, Madge, don't take it so hard," Ham grins. "Yuh can have him when we get through! He ain't goin' to be much the worse for wear!"

"Ham," Judge Adams gets stern. "I can tell from the expression on your face that you're up to some monkeyshine. Out with it! Start from the beginning."

"Well," Ham commences, "I made a trip out to Porcello's ranch. Went over it with a finetooth comb. You'll remember the sheepherder, Mendoze, was the only witness who saw and backed up Porcello's claim that he killed Carl Humbert in self-defense. I found his bunk was made up neat, he'd taken no soogans, and his possibles were all in place. But he'd been gone for several days. Disappeared, about the same time Porcello did.

"Now, that pore feller was expecting something. I cut for sign and found where Porcello, riding that hoss with the fake weighted shoe, joined him. They camped out the first night near a sheep holding corral. I found these."

Ham reaches in his pocket and tosses a handful of buckshot onto the table.

"Mendoze pulled the lead from Porcello's shotgun loads. He feared the gypsy was goin' to blast him down so he'd never be able to tell the truth. He lied for his boss at Carl Humbert's inquest."

HAM pauses dramatically, then goes on, "but he wasn't blasted down. Folks, this skull here belonged to Mendoze! Porcello, on that bronc rigged with a weighted shoe like Dale's, roped and dragged pore Mendoze to death. He then put his own clothes on the corpse, knocked out a tooth, and dragged the body to the middle of the sink for the buzzards to work on, and us to find.

"He wants Dale hung for the supposed murder of himself," Ham finishes. "So we're goin' to oblige him—except we'll pass the noose under Dale's arms!"

"What good'll that do?" the puzzled jury ramrod wants to know.

"Right now, Porcello is watching Buckstrap from the rimrocks with his range glasses." Ham explains. "He—"

"What we waitin' for?" The jury foreman cries angrily. "Let's form a posse and run down the rabid coyote!"

"No need!" Ham says seriously. "I aim to bait Porcello in."

"How?"

"He figgers we'll hang Dale," Ham explains. "Then he'll show up. The whole thing will be just a big mistake, he's just been out of these parts on business. Too danged bad. We've got a plumb baffllin' mystery on our hands. Oh, it's a neat package he thinks he's handin' us!

"But—" Ham darned near busts his arm patting himself on the back—"he ain't reckoned on the legal trainin' I got, or the general foxiness of my nature. I happen to know that coyote wants to buy Dale's spread. That's the real worm on my hook!"

A solemn procession marches from the courtroom. A noose is thrown over the limb of a big cottonwood. Dale, slumped in his saddle, is placed under the tree, and the noose carefully fitted under his arms. Rawson cuts the bronc with his quirt. It leaps, leaving Dale dangling.

In a few minutes, Madge drives up in her buckboard. The body is lowered into the buggy, covered with a tarp, and she sorrowfully drives off in the direction of her ranch.

"Mind you, kids," Ham calls after them, "don't stick yore nose out of doors. Spend yore honeymoon in the house!"

Yeah, I forgot to tell you. At Ham's request, Judge Adams marries the couple just before we leave the courtroom to string up Dale.

On the way home, Ham plasters both counties with signs saying that as executor of Dale Pringle's estate, he'll sell the Sleeping P spread to the highest bidder on the following Saturday.

Saturday morning, Ham grimly takes apart his cutters, cleans them, and reloads with fresh store ammunition.

"Pard," I say, "let me 'tend to this. I'll load our old ten gauge goose gun with double oughts and blow a barn door in Porcello. No man in his right mind goes up against his sawed-off with a pair of cutters."

"Egg," Ham grins, "yuh forget I'm a feathered-out lawyer. Abating Porcello quick would be too good for the skunk! I aim to prosecuting attorney his neck into a noose. It'll give me a chance to orate somethin' elegant!"

"Humph!" I grunt. "You might wake up pleadin' your case before St. Peter!"

At ten, Ham steps out on the porch, a bundle of papers in his hand. I lean the goose gun handy, just inside the door, and follow him. Ham gazes at the crowd, grins, and commences to read what he says is an inventory of the late Dale Pringle's spread. He's the least jittery hairpin of the bunch.

One page, two, three long pages, he reads. Still there's no sign of Porcello.

The crowd is getting spooked, like horses corralled in grizzly country. They shift uneasy, building their smokes, take a few quick shallow drags, flip the half-finished quirly away, and nervously commence to roll another.

Ham still drones on. Ain't Porcello going to show? Has Ham's scheme leaked out?

There's the muffled hoofbeat of a lashed team. Every head is jerked around. Porcello saws his team to a quick stop. With his sawed-off in the crook of his arm, he steps stiffly down from his buckboard, like he's driven far. With quick slinky movements, like a puma, he joins the crowd.

"What's this?" Ham apes, aghast with

astonishment. "Porcello? Man, we thought yuh was dead!"

"Well, I ain't!" the sheepman snaps. "Been down in Wyoming for a couple of weeks."

"But we hung Dale Pringle for murderin' yuh!" Ham declares. "We—"

"That's his hard luck!" Porcello grits heartlessly. "So he's dead! Well, get on with that sale, lardhead!"

Porcello turns, glaring savagely at the crowd with cold slitted eyes, and challenges, hoarsely, "Any yuh jaspers figger on biddin' against me?"

Silently the ranchers fall away, leaving a wide alley between the sheepman killer and Ham.

"Say, Porcello," Ham drawls, "what became of yore sheepherder, Mendoze?"

"How'd I know?" Porcello scowls with a shrug.

He keeps his poker face. But I see his right thumb unconsciously inch forward toward the hammers of his sawed-off, then freeze. I reach inside the door and wrap my fingers around the barrel of the goose gun. Ham's fooling with blister-tempered fulminate.

"Mendoze is missin'," Ham goes on. "As lawmen, we just wanted to know. Mind steppin' inside to talk it over?"

"What's this? A stall?" Porcello growls. "The notices said ten o'clock. Get on with the sale!"

"After I've arrested yuh for murderin' Mendoze!" Ham barks. "Yuh comin' peace—"

Porcello roars out a savage curse, realizing he's been trapped. His thumb jerks back a hammer. His scatter-gun bellows from his hip. The quick-driven paw-howie of Ham's six-gun blends with the bellow before I can jerk out the goose gun.

PORCELLO half spins with the slug. His thumb claws at the hammer of his other barrel. He weaves a drunken, slack-kneed step. The strength drains from him, and he pitches forward on his face, the gun plopping into the dust.

Then my heart jumps into my throat, choking me.

"Ham! Ham! You all right?" I strangle.

Ham's standing as though dazed, wide-

[*Turn page*]

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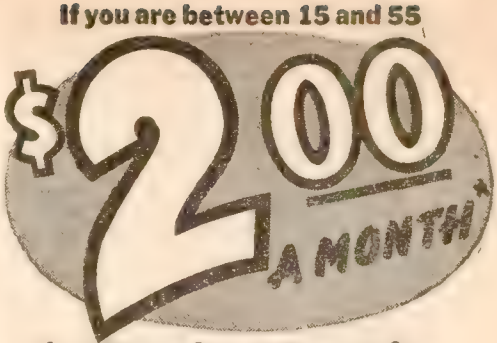

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eyed, slack-jawed. Then he commences to claw furiously at his clothes. He buck-jumps and scratches, like a breach-clouted Injun who's been pitched into a nettle clump. Ham rips open his hsirt. His unwerwear and his chest is blotched livid red, like a tornado sunset.

"Awk!" Ham yelps, jumping up and down and sputtering like a drop of crazy water on a hot griddle. "Oh! My gosh! Awk!"

Faster than a turpentined pup, Ham dashes for the hoss trough. The assembled ranchers string out after him like the tail of a comet. Ham dives head first into the trough and commences to duck and splash, rubbing his chest furious.

"What is it?" I cry.

Ham comes to the surface, his handlebar mustaches dripping like a steer's tail in a gullywasher. He yammers, then goes under, floundering like a salmon in a too shallow pool. I drag him out by the scruff of the neck. He shore looks like a forlorn half-drowned kitten.

"What is it?" I demand again, backed up by a chorus of ranchers.

"Well," Ham grins, lopsided, "Mendoze shore did me a favor!"

"Mendoze? Favor?" A dozen voices inquire.

"Yep," Ham goes on. "Remember, at Dale's trial, I showed yuh some buckshot I suspicioned Mendoze must have taken on the sly from the shells in Porcello's gun. Poor feller, expected to be blasted down. Well—" Ham scratches himself. "He couldn't find anythin' around the sheep camp to refill the shells with. So he used some salt scraped off a lick block!"

"Fool luck!" I clip. "You coulda had a window blowed in you!"

"L—look! Scatter!" Ham yammers, diving under water.

I spin around. Porcello has come to. On hands and knees, his head down like a sick steer, he's groping for his sawed-off. My quick shot kicks dirt in his face. In a minute, I've got the cuffs on the woozie sheepman.

"Why'n'ell didn't you kill the coyote, instead of shootin' him a little sick!" a rancher demands, fishing Ham from the trough.

Ham looks plumb shocked at the cowman. He squeezes the water from his mustaches like a nester milking a cow and shoves his left hand inside his shirt to scratch. Standing knee-deep in the watering trough, my pardner dramatically raises his right trigger finger high in the air for attention.

"Friends, cattlemen, and ranchers," he orates with a flourish. "Harken to my words. Pray don't hold it against me that I didn't pitchfork this here knee-fare-ious sheep herder into Hades. I got a heap of law learnin' that cost me ten dollars and sixty cents, includin' postage. I appoint myself Sweetgrass prosecutin' attorney!"

"Yeah! S w e l l! Peacherino!" the ranchers shout their approval.

"Thanks, fellers!" Ham goes on. "I not only aim that we should stretch Porcello's neck legal for murder, but I got another charge against the varmit!"

My pardner jerks open his shirt, exposing his red rock salt peppered hide.

"I'm goin' to prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law for *salt* an' battery!"

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 10)

time. Freedom is always followed by excesses. Barn-kept horses kick up their heels like colts when they're first turned out to pasture.

This Jazz Period was one of the symptoms of change produced by the Machine Age, which dawned with the present century. The urge for personal freedom, for a more abundant life, exerted itself on a world-wide scale. That was the moving force behind a war—two wars. Such complex confusion was produced in wartime that nobody is yet able to see through it clearly to the future.

The Pattern of Our Lives

But one thing stands out fairly plain. That is, people are learning that their actions affect not only the neighbors next door but neighbors across the seas. The Machine Age has so shortened time and distance that the new conception of human society spans the earth. The new rules of human conduct must be on a global scale.

How will all this change the pattern of our personal lives, here in America? Well, freedom in wholesale quantity very likely will restrict the freedom of the individual. Of some individuals, in particular. The sanctimonious scoundrel who prayed and prayed, he'll be tight-reined. The days of the stock market raider, the short-weight storekeeper and the "malefactors of great wealth" will not return. Powerful empires that prosper by their colonial possessions already are crumbling.

As humanity increases, making civilized life more complicated, more laws will be needed to control the rambunctious members of the human family. Naturally, then, violations will rise. After all, the more rules there are, the easier and more often are they broken. That's the difference between a free-for-all and a match governed by ring rules—no hitting in the clinches or below the belt, giving a downed contender the full count and ending each round at the bell.

Those are the thoughts that came to me, folks, when I saw that old-timer in buckskins spurt past the grandstand. He might have been Father Time himself. It was prophetic when the shadows swallowed his gallant figure. Thus the old order goeth. The past must clear the stage for the future.

Maybe I'm trying to console myself with these remarks. Because sometimes my heart is heavy with regrets as I see one symbol after another of the Old West vanish. For I remember the days when a man could roam and hunt and fish at will, and what he did affected mighty few others—because there were fewer of us, then.

The Normal Life

But I always come back to one solid belief, which I've expressed real often in these Home Corral get-togethers. The best chances for happiness now and always has been in normal living. The normal life is in the family group. And no place in all the world is there a better place for the average family than in a small Western town or outlying community.

Here are the Americans rooted firmly in our national tradition, who respect the past and give hope for the future, their own and that of the rest of the muddled, groping world.

Now, let's talk about something cheerful.

Here's a true-life story that might sort of brighten up you veterans, the ones who came back from war handicapped. I'll tell it just as it happened:

The Army hospital doctor said, "Soldier, it's bad news for you. You'll never work again. You're getting your discharge on total disability."

There was plenty wrong with that soldier, all right. Wounds and disease had nearly finished him. The doctors words didn't leave him much to hope for. A good many men would have given up. But this one didn't. In a Western magazine he read about a place he always had wanted to see. He made up his mind he would see it.

That resolution helped him to get back on his feet and soon as he was able he headed for that place.

Well, that was a long time ago. This friend of mine, he's a World War I veteran, you see. He always loved to fish. That helped him. Nowadays he can billygoat over rocks, in and out of the water, just a little faster than most able-bodied hombres would care to follow. He has a cabin in the woods, beside a mountain stream. His pension feeds him. But he keeps busy, just the same, and has become an expert tackle-maker. He's lived thereabouts for 17 years, now. He has many

[*Turn page*]

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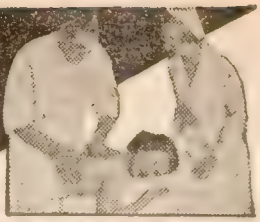

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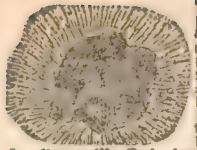

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friends who visit him often. There's a veterans' hospital in a town not far away, so come time when he needs a check-up or some patching, he gets it.

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But the doctor who told him he was washed up, he's been dead for years!

It came to my mind just now, because a letter came from this friend of mine. He writes, "Hurry on down, old pal. They're biting fine. Just caught a six-pounder. Don't bring a load of goods. I've got about anything we need. Come and enjoy yourself."

Know what I'm going to do, hombres and hombresses? Bet you can guess. I'm rolling together my soogans and heading for Honey Creek, right now, pronto!

So *adios*, until POPULAR WESTERN Magazine comes in bloom again on the newsstands.

—DOC LONG TRAIL.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

LEADING off the next issue is a fast-moving, gun-slinging novelet of a young doctor who burns all his bridges behind him and decides to set up his first practice in the West—a country as unknown to him as his profession was to those he was called on to give treatment. THE TENDERFOOT DOCTOR—written by Frank Richardson Pierce, who knows his West from Border to Border—finds himself in the middle of action from the very beginning of this novelet.

He was a doctor, not a gun-slinger, yet from the opening scenes he finds himself tangling with the Lava Hill outfit, as hard-bitten a gang of outlaws that ever roamed the bad lands. Led by the Brawley brothers, they plundered and murdered at will—and disappeared into the vastness of the Lava Hills, to plan more depredations. And young doctors were their meat—they'd already killed one, when he lost a patient who was a member of the Brawley brothers gang.

By way of a taste of what this novelet of THE TENDERFOOT DOCTOR holds for you readers, we'll let you see the opening of this tale: the young doctor's first glimpse of the real West:

Young Doc Burke's heart was pounding rapidly, and he frowned and diagnosed his condition. It was simple enough. He was seeing the West for the first time and something within him was accepting the challenge. His heart was pounding with excitement. Calmness, of course, would return after he had seen a little more of the country. Within the past five minutes, sitting in the smoker of the Overland train, he had made his decision. Somewhere in the West he would hang up his shingle and wait for his first practice. . . .

Besides several years in college, Doc had also put in time in an Eastern hospital. To give potential patients confidence, he had grown a furious beard . . . probably full of germs. But Doc knew little of germs, it being a period when oil lamps lighted the passenger cars. The cars were made of wood, which splintered readily when there were wrecks. The lighted oil lamps did the rest.

Doc was smoking a cigar and thinking of the horror of railroad wrecks when the train jolted to a stop. "What're we stopping here for?" he asked. He opened a window and started to poke out his head for a better look. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," his seatmate advised. "It might be a holdup. And if it is, the road agents discourage such things by shooting along the cars!"

The man pulled a huge diamond ring off his finger and put it on the floor. He opened his draw-string purse, removed ten twenty-dollar gold pieces, dropped them on the floor and covered them with orange peelings and egg shells left when a previous occupant had eaten a lunch. "It's best to leave a little money for the robbers," the man said. "If they find nothing on a man, they know he's cached some of his money. Finding nothing, after all the risk he's taken, makes a robber mighty annoyed . . . mighty annoyed!"

A revolver cracked, then a rifle let go and a bullet droned past the window. "Forty-five seventy," the other observed. "Pretty heavy lead those cusses are packing. Chances are it's the Lava Hill outfit."

"Lava Hill?" Doc queried.

"Yeah," the other answered. "They got a hideout in the back country. Millions of years ago, or anyway, thousands, there were volcanoes from hell to breakfast in these parts." With narrowed eyes, he was watching the door. He had his hands ready to lift on the slightest order. Doc wondered why the men weren't taking measures of defense. "Well," the other continued, "if you can imagine plowed ground with furrows five hundred feet deep, you can get an idea of what the back country is like. Best place in the world for a robbers' roost . . ."

"Why aren't we getting down behind the seats and preparing to blast them into the middle of next week when they come through the door?" Doc Burke asked.

[*Turn page*]

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"You'll find out,' the other replied. "You haven't been in the West long enough to get onto the tricks."

"Here comes a lady," Doc said.

"I've been expecting her," the other said softly.

The woman was as white as the proverbial sheet. She held a grain sack in her hands and was followed by a masked man carrying a pair of six-guns. "Buck Brawley," Doc Burke's seatmate said. "Or his brother Ed."

Now, at this stage of his career, young Doc Burke had no more idea who the Brawley brothers might be than what his own professional career would hold for him in the near future. But read on and discover Doc's reaction to his first meeting with a Western bad man.

"Now, boys," Brawley was saying, "remember you are gentlemen and there's a lady in our midst. Kindly shell out. First hold up your money and rings. I know some of you will try to hold out, but that's dangerous. If I find a man has held out on me, or if I *think* a man's holding out, I'll kill him deader'n a mackerel! Hurry, and don't keep the lady waiting. Lady, make sure there ain't any money on the floor . . ."

"I don't think much of this business of tamely submitting to a holdup," Doc Burke grumbled.

"If you expect to become a famous Western doctor," the other suggested, "you'd better use your head instead of fists or six-guns."

"That's pretty hard to remember when your instincts are to cut loose with knuckles of lead," Doc said . . .

"Don't forget this," the other warned. "Out here gun-fighters, sheriffs, marshals, punchers, miners and teamsters, to name a few, are plentiful . . . but doctors are few and far between. And you can't make one in a few days or months. Never forget this, your duty to humanity comes first."

"Search the young squirt hiding behind the whiskers," the outlaw ordered.

"He's a young doctor just hanging out his shingle," Barney Lee said. "And he's dead broke."

"Come here, Doc. I want to talk to you,' the outlaw said.

Well, folks, what the outlaw said had a terrific bearing on young Doc Burke's future. Read this featured novelet of THE TENDERFOOT DOCTOR in the next issue, and see how he diagnosed the troubles that beset him in his first meeting with the old West!

Another favorite writer of the West—Allan K. Echols—opens up a situation in his novelet THE PRIDE AND THE GUN that will hold the reader until the very end. Dale Redpath had searched five years for the man who had stolen his girl—to find those years had etched a story of hardship on her. And when she accused him of riding as a paid gunman for a neighboring rancher, who was death to

nesters—Redpath had only one answer: "What do you care if I do?"

If you want the answer to this thrilling saga, read the next issue and find it in THE PRIDE AND THE GUN.

"Painted Post is on the map at last—or mighty soon will be!" roars Judge John Bertram, in Tom Gunn's novelet, THE WHANG LEATHER KID, in the next issue. "Our pioneer days are over, boys!" he boomed. "From now on, it's progress and prosperity for everybody!"

And why?—because a new railroad was about to cross the judges range. Sheriff Blue Steele said nothing. He had put Painted Post on the map, though in a different way than a connecting railroad. The famous two-gun lawman and his loyal deputy, Shorty Watts, had brought peace and order, such as there was, to the Border country. But with the railroad coming in now—well, THE WHANG LEATHER KID will explain Blue Steele's actions!

And this issue, too, will carry its quota of interesting action-packed stories written by the finest authors we can get to put paper in typewriter—plus departments and fact articles about those who made the West. Look forward to a grand number.

OUR LETTER BOX

THE HEADING says "Our" Letter Box, but it is really "Your" Letter Box, readers, for we run this department solely to hear from *you* about your likes and dislikes among the stories we publish. It's on the basis of what you write in that we can figure what you desire in a story. So don't hesitate to pound us with letters. We like it. And even if you don't like something in POPULAR WESTERN, tell us: we can take it. And if you do like a story—well, we like to be flattered at times, too. Here's what some of our readers write in:

Coming across one of your *Popular Western* magazines recently, I read it right through. The reading was a 100% better than any British

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...f Westerns. I find it a great misfortune ... not available in Eire; as a matter of ...act, a lot of people in Eire would be very grateful if you could make it possible. I would also like a pen friend in one of the "Cowboy" states, as I am very interested in the United States.—*George C. Byrne, Dublin, Ireland.*

Straight from the Blarney Stone, this is, Mr. Byrne—and we like your kind words. We've run stories of Irish cowboys roaming the prairies, too. And good lads they are!

How about bearing down more on fact articles and giving us more of the old West in reality? Your fiction stories are good—very good. But some of us readers like the realness of fact stuff, something we can mull over and give us a basis for the fiction tales we read . . . Painted Post, with Sheriff Steele and Deputy Shorty, still takes my fancy. You can't beat those two lawmen for sheer nerve and determination. Let's have more. —*Anthony Laurie, Pittsburgh, Penna.*

We sift our fact articles for the best, Tony, and be sure that what you read here are the best of the real West in fact. Let's have more honest criticism, we thrive on it.

Maybe you think it strange, getting a letter from out here in the desert, from the Old Pueblo —Tucson, in fact. After all, many of your stories are laid in this locale, with the Border as a background. But even if this is ranch country, we still like to read fiction of the West. You might think it like "carrying coals to Newcastle", but somehow, living here in the West, it makes the reading of stories with Western background much more interesting. Don't you think so? I tried to pick out the stories I liked best in a recent isue of POPULOR WESTERN, but gave it up as a bad job. Why?—I liked all of them! Now, don't you like that?—*Julius Carmon, Tucson, Arizona.*

We sure do like it, Julius. We thrive on kind words, the more the better. We were down in your country one time not so long ago, and like a lot of other people, we took a great liking to the Old Pueblo. Maybe someday we'll get back there. But until then, *adios, amigo.*

Well, that's about all for this issue, pardners. Thanks to everybody—we get a great kick out of reading your letters, and invite all of you to write us—The more letters that come in, the better we like it. Write anything about what you think of POPULAR WESTERN—good or bad, but *write!* Just address a letter or postcard to The Editor, POPULAR WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

Good-by now, until the next issue—and happy reading!

—THE EDITOR.

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